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ANDY McNAMARA
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Only In Dreams

For over a decade, Media Molecule has been sparking the imagination of gamers everywhere. It may not be a household name, but it should be. I remember when I first saw its debut game, LittleBigPlanet, I basically couldn't fathom the depth. When I thought they had showed me the bottom, they would dig a little deeper.

The way the company deftly mixes tools with creativity is something truly rare in games and technology. Yes, there are plenty of tools out there to create games, but finding a way to make it easy enough to understand so anyone can create and play with them is something completely different. This is where Media Molecule differentiates itself and makes it a one-in-a-million game studio.

Similar to my first viewing of LittleBigPlanet back in 2007, my introduction to Dreams shattered my perceptions of how you could mix productivity with fun. Of course, nothing sounds less fun than the word "productivity," but in this case I feel Media Molecule has shown over the last decade that being creative in games isn't about productivity but about the rush of exploring your own imagination and experiencing the imaginative works of others.

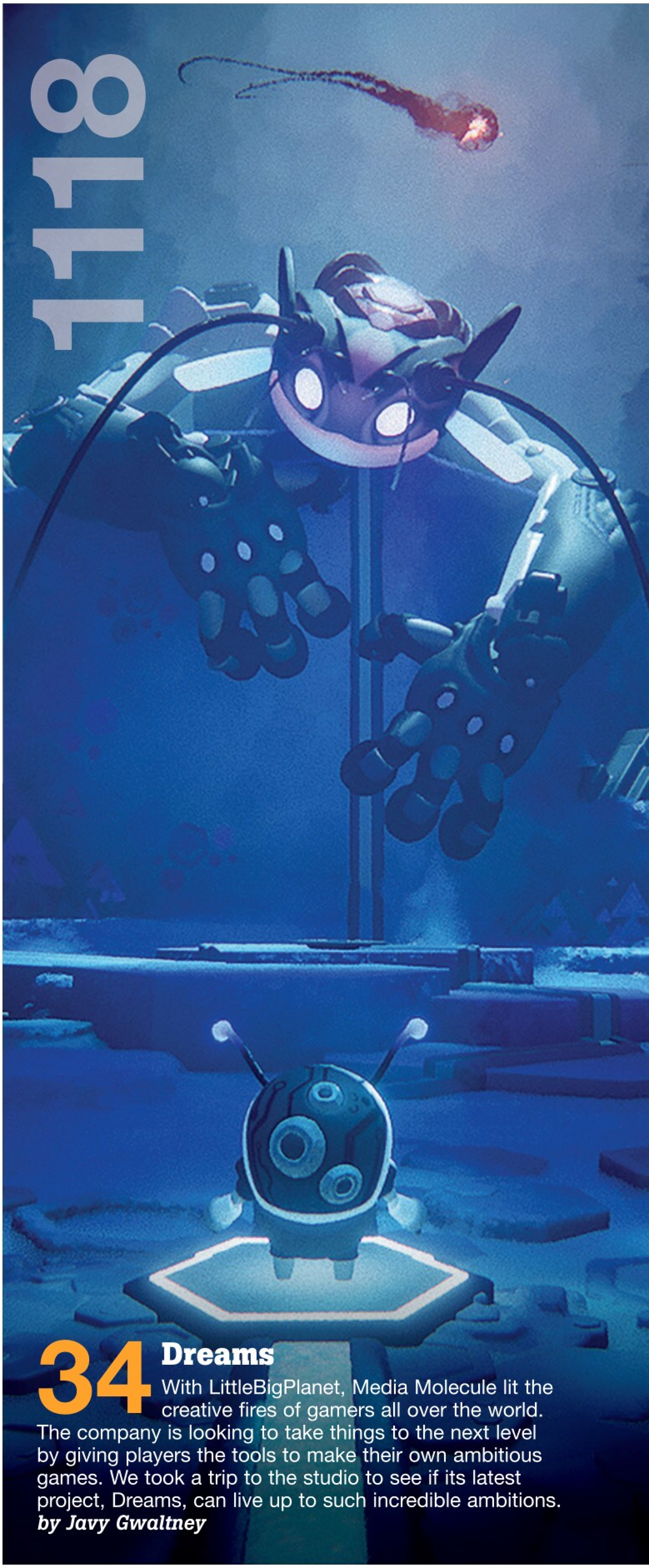
Yes, there is a core game here, but Dreams is really about what players create, and the game will only be as great as the community that supports it. I hope that this cover story (pg. 34) inspires someone to play and create in the world of Dreams. Being creative is a powerful thing, and this game could inspire a new generation of game creators if Media Molecule delivers. I know I believe it will, because the moment I saw this game, I knew I wanted to put it on our cover.

Amazingly, our cover art this month was created by Media Molecule within Dreams, which marks the first time our cover art was made in a game. Just add that to the list of things that I thought were possible only in Dreams (queue Weezer soundtrack, fade to black).

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter



34 Dreams
With LittleBigPlanet, Media Molecule lit the creative fires of gamers all over the world. The company is looking to take things to the next level by giving players the tools to make their own ambitious games. We took a trip to the studio to see if its latest project, Dreams, can live up to such incredible ambitions.
by Javy Gwaltney

12 Legend Of The Beast
Daigo Umehara is arguably the most famous fighting-game player in the world, and is still a major part of the fighting-game community. We had a chance to shadow him during Evo 2018.

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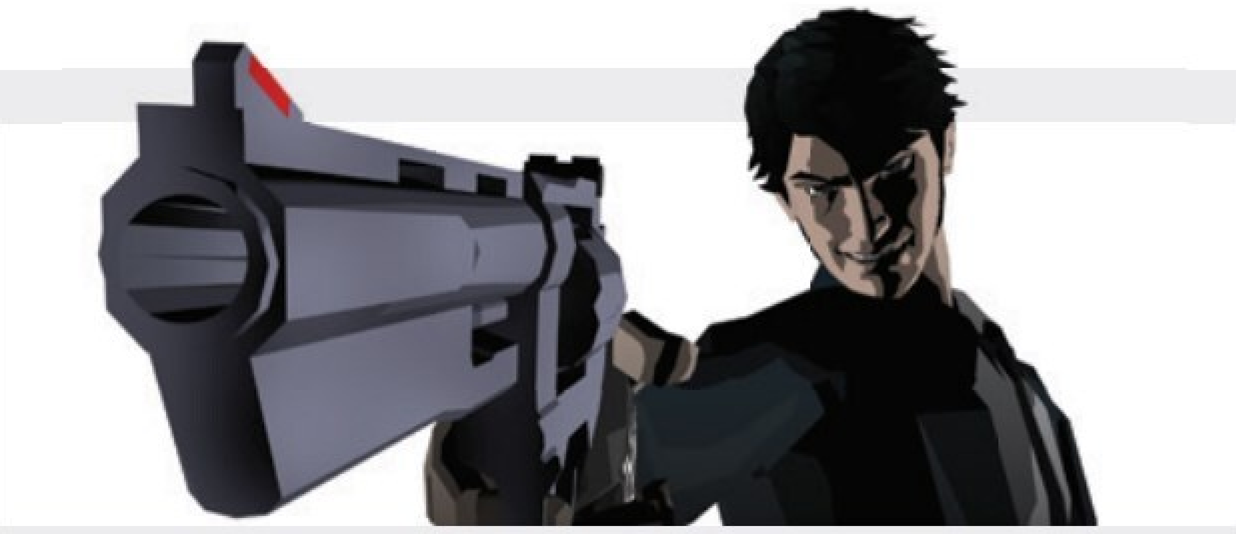
What does next year look like for Nintendo's console?



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We spoke with Suda 51 about the history of one of the strangest game dev studios out there.

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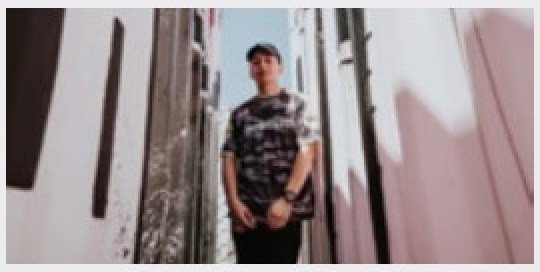
PAX has become a haven for showcasing indie games and we walked out of the show with a list of favorites.



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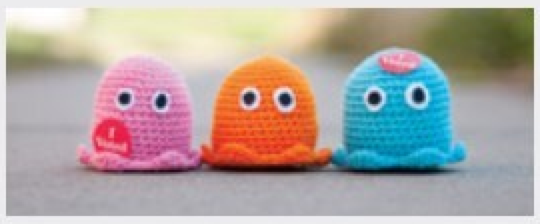
This Fortnite pro talks about the ins and outs of coaching a new generation of pro gamers.



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Statistics show that the people playing the most games are also the ones casting the fewest votes. We can change that.

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Despite being one of the most anticipated games of the year, Rockstar has kept Red Dead Redemption II under wraps – until now. We played through the first five hours to learn how Rockstar continues to innovate in the open-world genre it helped popularize.

58 Just Cause 4 We got in a fight with a tornado, which is as absurd as it sounds.

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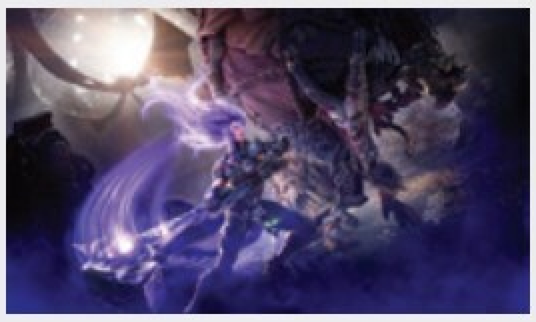
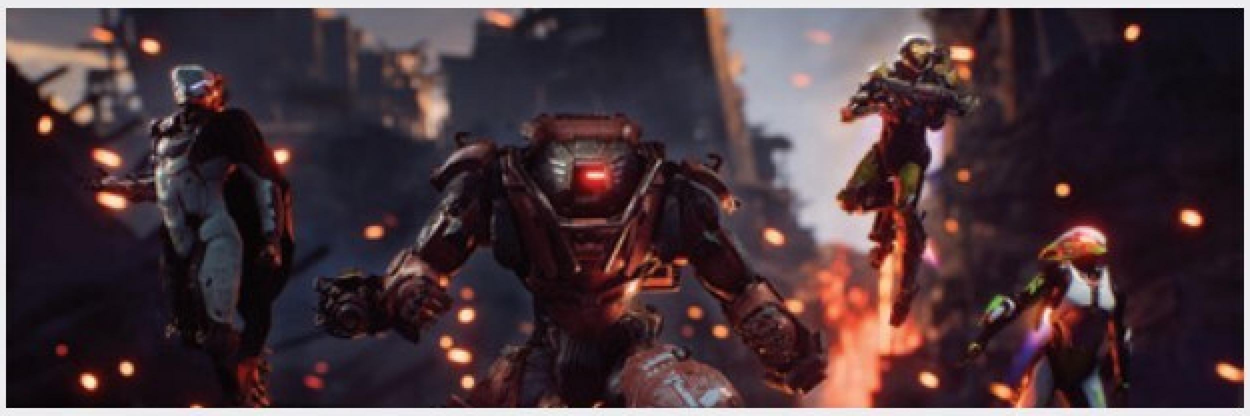


62 Darksiders III A new developer is handling Fury's adventure, but we're still excited to experience the next chapter.



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81 Mega Man 11 Does the Blue Bomber stand the test of time?

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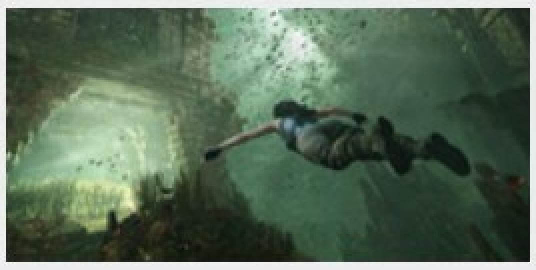

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XBOX ONE PS4 Disney SQUARE ENIX

Readers revolted against a G.I. review this month – not for the score, mind you, but the timing. Digital board games, an N64 classic, and No Man's Sky's redemption were also hot topics.

Fortnite Frustrations

How dare you name Fortnite Game of the Month in last issue. The game came out well over a year ago so it does not qualify. How much did Epic Games pay you for this? I have been a reader for over 15 years and this is the first time I've considered not renewing my subscription. Making a one-year-old game Game of the Month is reckless and irresponsible. P.S. Fortnite isn't even that good.

Jason French
via email

Fortnite is your Game of the Month? Ironically, I'm 13 years old, so I'm around the age of players that Fortnite appeals to. However, I just don't get why it's the Game of the Month. If it's good, fine – but the battle royale mode released last year! We all have our opinions, and I'll respect yours, but I just don't agree.

Sam A.
via email

As much as we love being told what does and doesn't qualify for an award in our own magazine, reviewing Fortnite now was indeed a hard call. Our policy to not review early access games prevented us from reviewing Fortnite at launch last year. However, the game's meteoric rise in popularity since then (while still in early access) has only exposed our policy as increasingly outdated for the modern market. As such, we scrapped it, and "dared" to time our review with Fortnite's Season 5 launch. Andy outlined the changes in his Letter From The Editor, which also received its share of feedback.

Under Review

Thank you for Andy's letter regarding how you plan on reviewing games from here on out (Rethinking Reviews, issue 305). I absolutely agree that developers taking money from consumers must be held accountable for the state of their games. More and more games are getting released with glitches galore, to the point that many people simply refuse to pre-order games or – like me – have acquired a jaded perspective on what the future of gaming holds. Many gamers will choose which games to buy based on reviews, and I'm happy to see that G.I. takes that enormous responsibility seriously.

Jonathan Troyer
via email

I just read Andy's letter, and I'm glad someone is finally (officially) talking about the issues with early access games. Though the piece was intended to inform us of how G.I. is dealing with reviews, I have been telling everyone about this issue for a long time now. I usually just get laughed at, or the occasional light debate of how I'm wrong. Too many games now are abusing the idea of early access and beta. They use it, like Andy said, to hand out poorly produced games, then hide behind the labels – sometimes with no plan to ever fully "complete" the game. These games are taking advantage of us yet nobody seems to see it. I think it's hurting the industry more than people realize and somebody needs to bring this up before it's too late. Thank you for finally hitting on this topic and please bring more awareness to the problem.

Frank Dacanay
via email

This month's responses to Andy's letter have been unanimously positive, if occasionally a bit misguided. As such, it's worth noting that our goal isn't to stick it to developers who release buggy games, in early access or otherwise. We simply want to ensure our reviews are as timely, relevant, and informative as possible – we're kind of obligated to by the name of the magazine. We're still hammering out how to best achieve that goal, but reviewing early access games that are available for purchase is a good first step. Keep an eye out for more changes in future issues!

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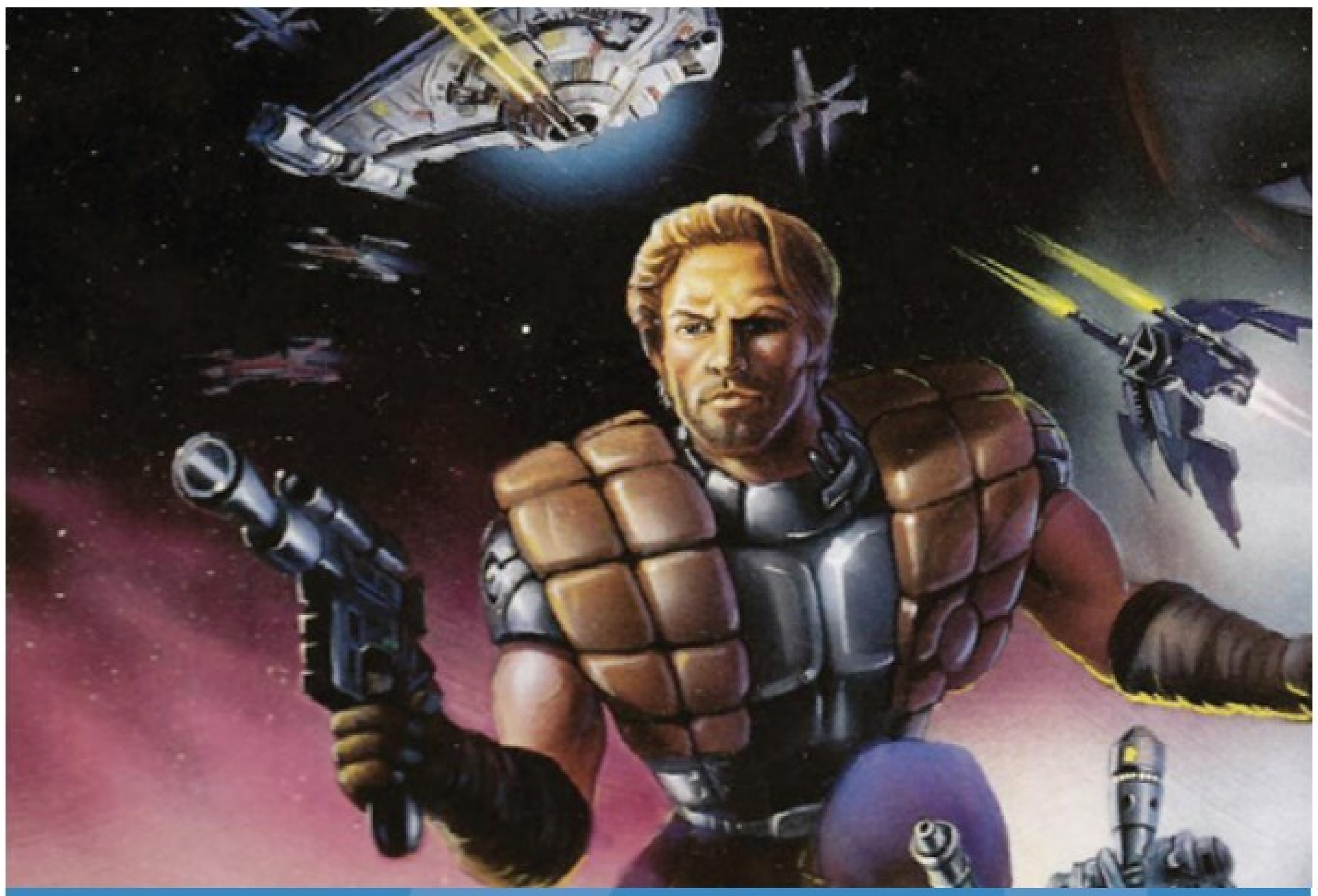
Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!



Out Of The Shadows

I was super excited to see your retrospective on Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire (Classic, issue 305). I got that gem of a game for my 10th birthday and played it almost as much as Mario 64. It was very cool to read about how the game came to be, and interesting to hear the project lead Jon Knoles talk about the trials and tribulations of development. The most interesting tidbit was how Knoles said it was a bad idea to have so many different play styles in one game, because I personally loved the level variety (although I know it was probably taxing on him and his team). I have always wanted an HD remake of this game because I know it would be a blast to play it again all smoothed out and polished. I also know my 9-year-old son would enjoy it as much I did over 20 years ago. Thanks again for writing about this!

Matt Hardesty
via email

Thanks to it being one of the first and biggest third-party titles on Nintendo 64, Shadows of the Empire holds a special spot in many gamers' hearts – whether it deserves that much credit or not. If you're looking to replay it, a (slightly) enhanced version is available on Steam. And who knows? Considering how Star Wars-crazy Disney is now, maybe we'll even see Dash Rendar on the silver screen someday – we're sure Star Wars fans would love to complain about that forever and ever!

Boarding Zone

I started playing video games on the NES as a kid, but I also grew up playing board games such as Risk, Monopoly, and chess. I've always wanted to get into more in-depth board games and also get my two kids into them (they're already into video games). Seeing your article about mobile board games (Tabletop Gaming Goes Digital, issue 305) was just fantastic. It's great to be able to play a board game without worrying about the kids wrecking it (I haven't been able to do a puzzle since my 6-year-old son was born), and I appreciate being able to play against the A.I. in the more complicated games. I'm definitely going to check out all the games you mentioned – except Pandemic. That's one of the few board games my wife is into playing, and we actually just recently played it on our 10-year anniversary.

Marc King
via email

I want to voice my appreciation for G.I.'s willingness to cover more than just video games. Issue 305 had great articles on both digital board games and video game-themed books to read, and I love that you guys are covering more media related to video games since a lot of people (myself included) are into those. I hope to keep seeing that kind of thing going forward!

Scott Bowen
via email

Technically, digital board games are still just video games, but we know what you mean. For more on video gaming's cardboard contemporaries, be sure to check out Matt Miller's Top of the Table column on gameinformer.com.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"What do you guys think of Donut County?"

We like it a "hole" lot!

"Who writes all the answers to our burning questions?"

As the last answer illustrates, they pretty much write themselves.

"You described a 1/10 rating as 'Ligma' in last issue. What's Ligma?"

We honestly have no clue.

Reader Gibberish:

"Why is Skyrim a rpg there is no role playing. Because there r no other games that r different."

Question Of The Month:

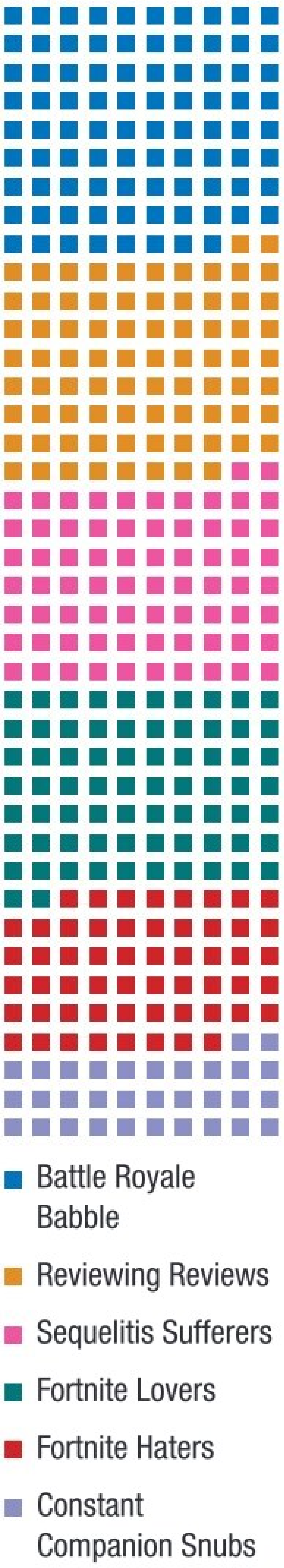
What's the best thing you've ever created in a video game?

gi spy

(Left) This month Media Molecule showed us what Dreams is made of. That joke would be funnier if we weren't such sticklers for proper grammar. **(Right)** Ben Reeves did his best Lara Croft impression for Earl Baylon, who voices Jonah in Shadow of the Tomb Raider. The thumbs up is not meant as an endorsement.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Make A Mascot

In issue 305, we asked readers to dream up their own old-school video game mascot. Judging from the responses, some readers took this gravely important task more seriously than others.

When I was about 9 years old and shortly after Sonic 2 came out, I actually submitted my amazing new character to Sega for them to put into future Sonic games. He was Boom the Lion. He was named Boom both because he had a roar attack, and because it fit the speed-based naming conventions (Sonic, Boom, Miles Prower). I actually received a rejection letter from Sega, which was both cool and sad.

Ben Zaugg

I'm 13 and only got into games about a year ago, but if I could choose a mascot to be the centerpiece of a '90s/2000s game, it would hands-down be an armadillo. I chose this because it could roll into a ball like Sonic and also be kinda bulletproof thanks to its shell. I think armadillos are also a very recognizable animal.

Adiv Stoler

I'd take a Jackalope and name it Carl. That is all.

Sean Gelish

No Man's Salvation

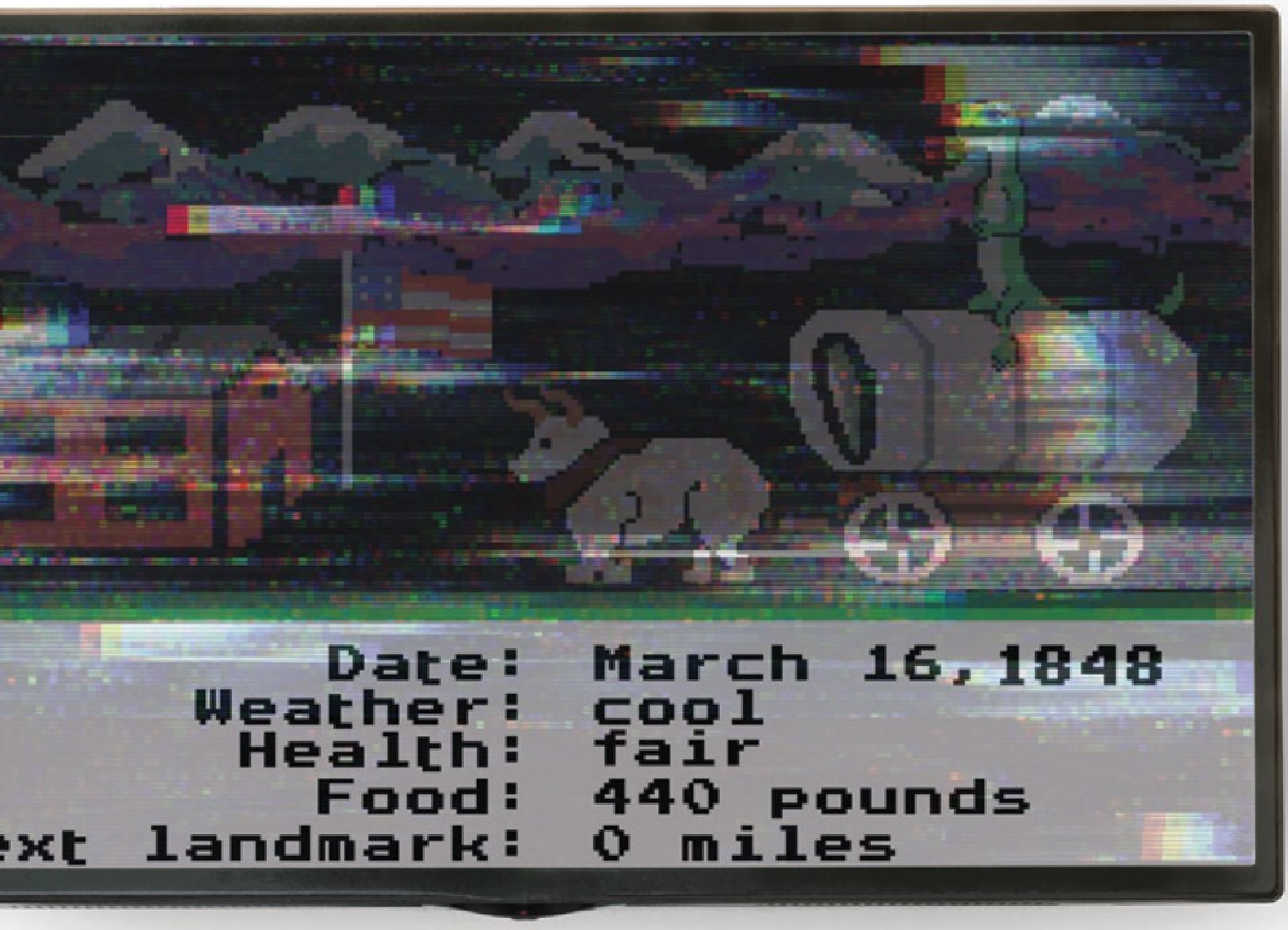
Last issue irritated me because it seems like you're oblivious to what has to rank as one of the greatest video game comebacks of all time. That would be No Man's Sky. When it was first released by Hello Games, No Man's Sky was fatally flawed and quickly went from must-have to must-avoid. Then the developer released two updates to the game: Atlas Rising and the most recent NEXT update. The last one changed the whole structure of the game and introduces multiplayer. Sure, it still needs some work, but what game today doesn't? The nature of No Man's Sky deviates from the violent mentality that pervades most games today. It is once again on the rise and is likely to continue for some time.

Omer Garland
via email

After two years of free updates and the recent launch of seasonal content drops (to coincide with the release of the Xbox One version), you can't accuse Hello Games of not trying to do right by its fans. Granted, some are still doing just that anyway – but those who aren't harboring a misguided vendetta seem pleased with the improvements. You can read our thoughts on No Man's Sky's NEXT update at gameinformer.com.

(Left) Dan Tack recently hung out with Twitch's Chase, League of Legend's voice actress Elspeth Eastman, and Red Bull Esports' Blake Shuster. Oh, and Spidey, obviously. **(Right)** Imran chatted about giant junk balls with Katamari Damacy director Keita Takahashi at PAX West.

(continued on page 10)



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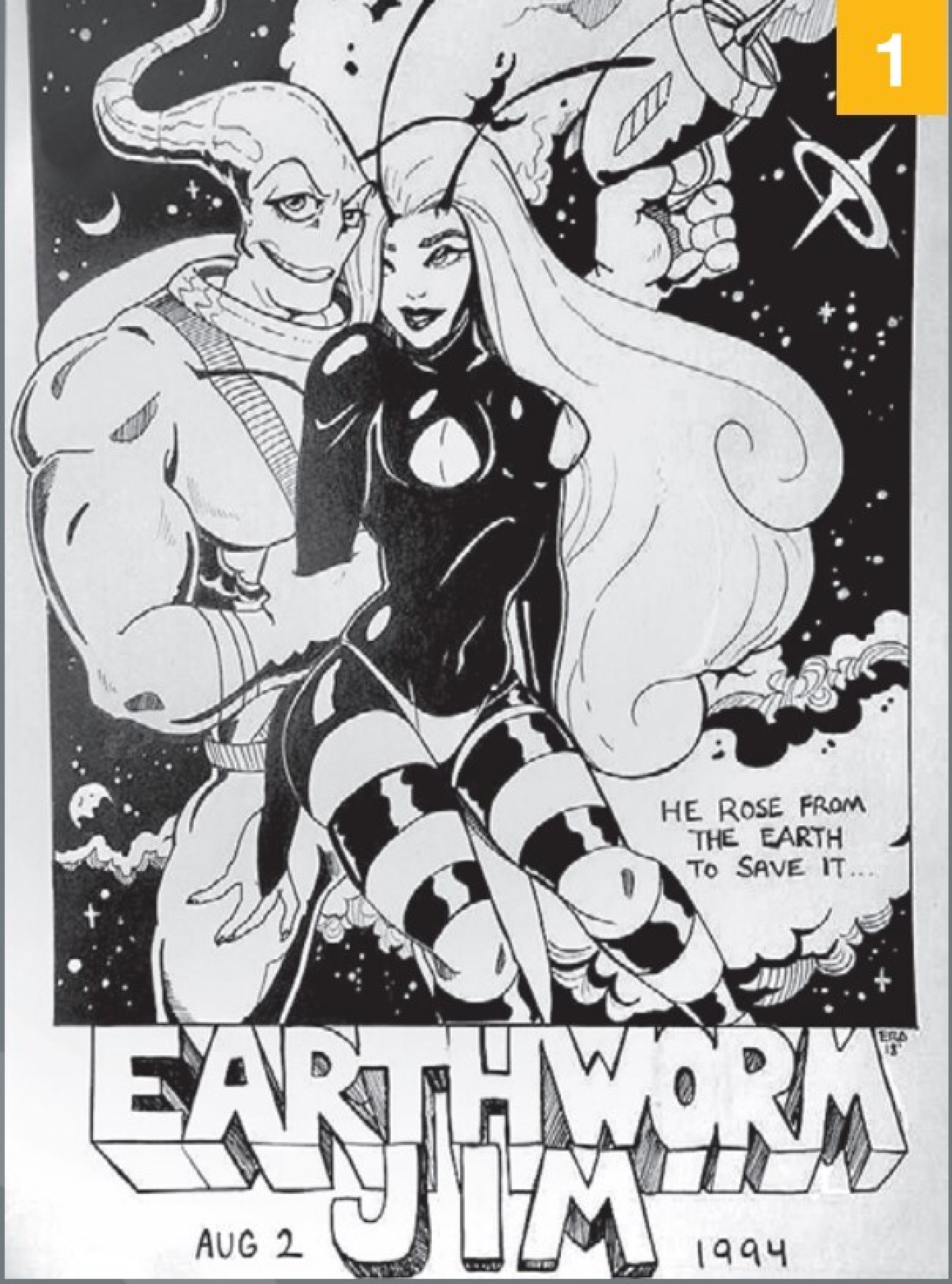
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WINNER

1 Emily Osantowski

Let's face it: This poster is way cooler than Earthworm Jim deserves.

2 Zephan Osiris

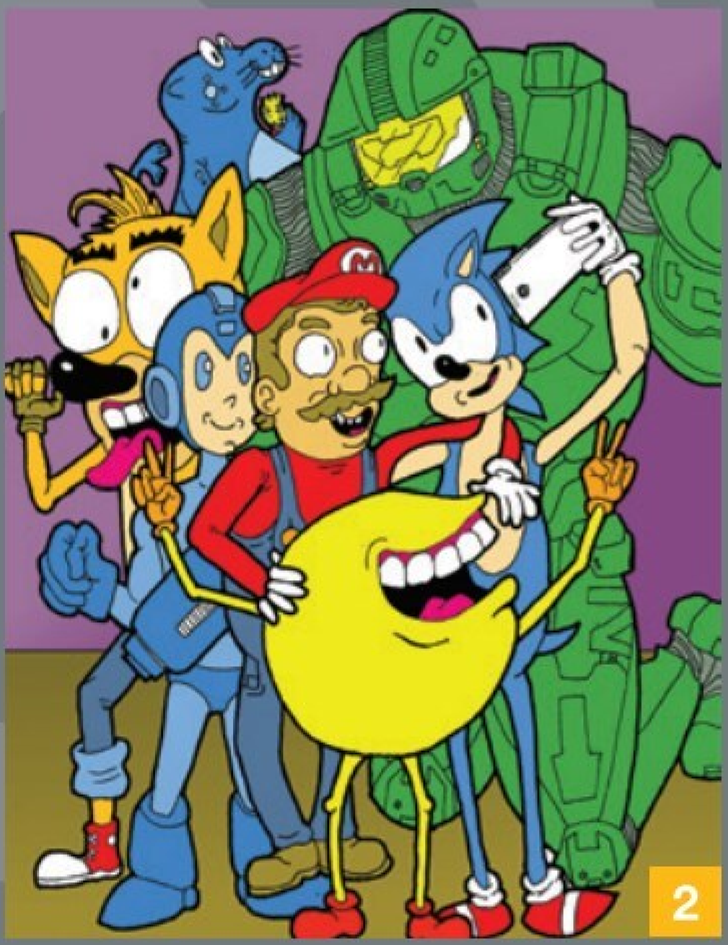
And now we know what a selfie of all our favorite video game characters would look like…if they were on drugs when they took it.

3 Eli Rodriguez

You'll never get a more apt summary of Monster Hunter than this.

4 Aaron Oliveras

We were confused by Peach and Rosalina's facial expressions in this picture, until we realized what was going on – clearly Luma just farted.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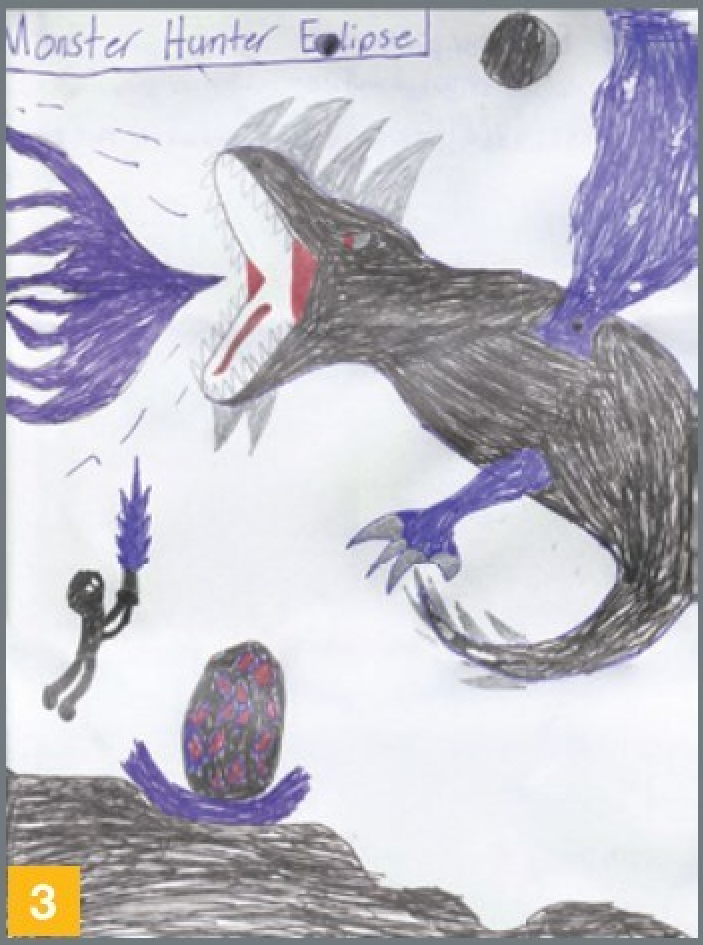
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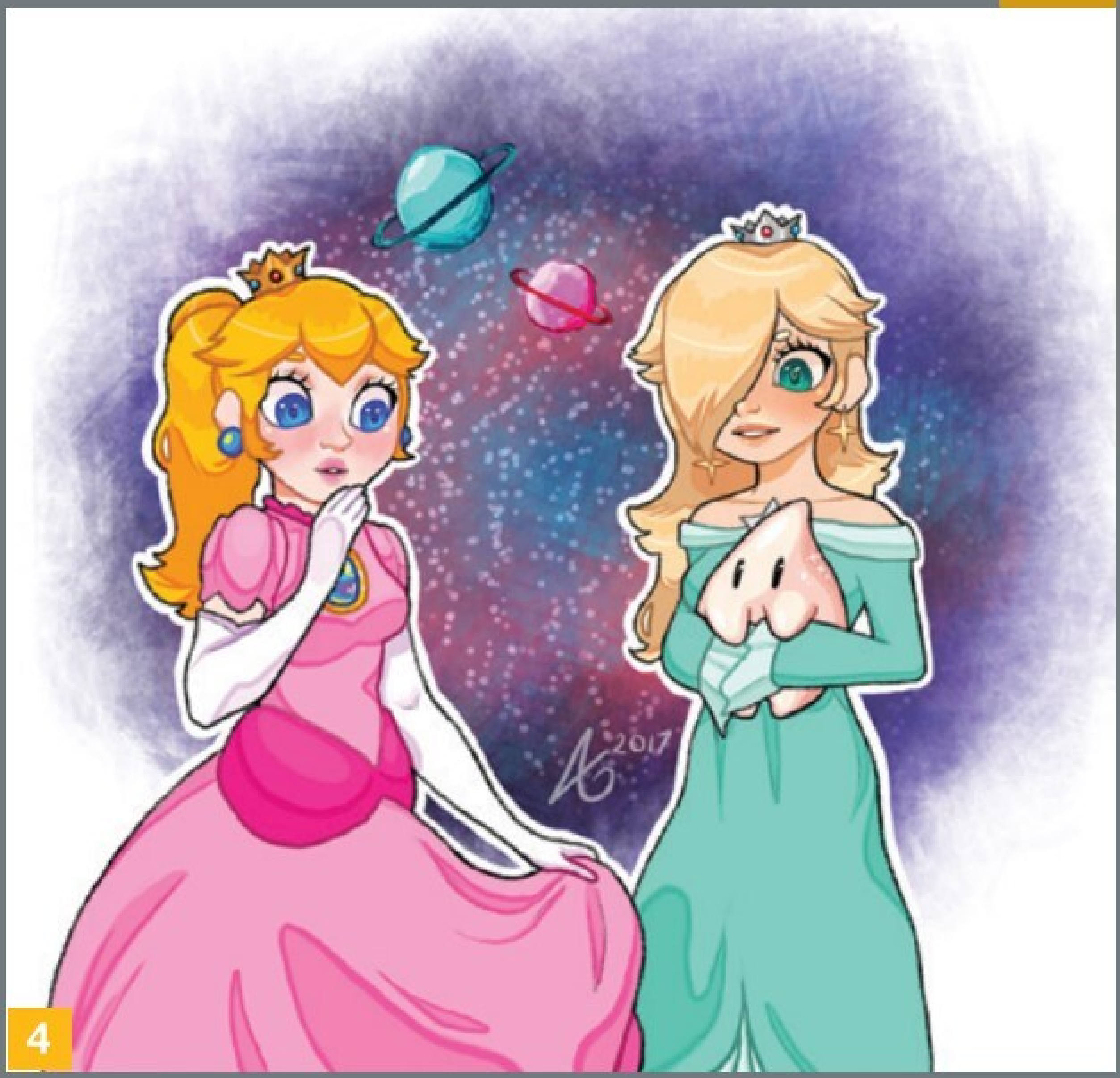
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(Left) Imran also caught up with Suda 51, who stopped to sign an autograph for expert cosplayer Thad Allen. **(Right)** Kyle recently chatted with Squanch Games' Justin Roiland and Tanya Watson about what it takes to make a funny game. It's all in the glasses, really.

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LEGEND OF THE BEAST

by Suriel Vazquez

Why Street Fighter's greatest champion still has something to prove

Daigo Umehara isn't sure he recalls the moment that made him famous. "I don't even know if I remember it, or I know it because I've seen the video so many times," he tells me.

In that video, Umehara is up against Justin Wong at the 2004 Evolution Championship Series (Evo) tournament for Street Fighter III: Third Strike. Umehara, with only a sliver of health left on his Ken, jockeys for position with Wong's Chun-Li, who refuses to attack. Why would he? All Wong has to do is let the clock run out.

Then the screen flashes. Wong hurtles toward Umehara with a barrage of kicks, hoping to finish him off. Fully aware this would happen, Umehara bats away the kicks one by one – a jaw-dropping feat of precision timing. As the crowd erupts into cheers, Umehara unleashes a devastating combo of his own to end the round, causing an even larger uproar.

"Evo Moment #37" has gone down as one of the most captivating moments in esports history. "Being in the room was straight-up bananas," says Seth Killian, a former Street Fighter competitor who is now a lead designer at Riot Games. "As the parry went on and everyone started losing their minds, nobody in that room was self-conscious."

In the years since, Umehara has become the world's most famous fighting-game player, drawing sponsorships from major game publishers and peripheral makers. He's written books and gives lectures at major companies and universities about having a winning mindset. In the fighting-game world, he's a legend on the level of Michael Jordan or Wayne Gretzky.

But as with any professional athlete, one question haunts Umehara: How long can he keep it up? Esports is seen as a young man's game, dominated by players in their late teens and early 20s, and Umehara is 37. We followed him for an entire weekend at this year's Evo, and it soon became clear that, for both himself and the community that supports him, Daigo Umehara needs to keep fighting.

NOW: MEET & GREET CYG BST PLAYERS

Umehara signs autographs with the rest of the Beast team: Bruce "Ganerbee" Hsiang, Keiro "Fuudo" Ai, Eduardo "PR Balrog" Perez, and Chris "ChristT" Tatarian

Street Fighter Alpha

While Evo Moment #37 is Umehara's greatest moment, it's far from his greatest accomplishment. Though he defeated Wong at Evo in 2004, he placed second that year. And by that time, he had already been a national Darkstalkers champion at age 16, and the international champion of Street Fighter Alpha 3 at age 17. After a hiatus that saw him venture into Mahjong and working full time at a nursing home, Umehara returned to compete in Street Fighter IV, becoming the Evo champ in 2009 and 2010.

Umehara's status reaches far past his record, however. "When people talk about Daigo, the first place they go to is straight-up religious descriptions," Killian says. Umehara's regularly called a Street Fighter "god," and acts as an inspiration for any fighting-game fan looking to test their mettle. "Everyone who has played sets with him recognizes his deep dedication to the game and supernatural ability to look straight into your soul," Killian says.

When I first find Umehara at this year's Evo, he's in the middle of a Street Fighter V match. After a bit of a slump during the game's early seasons, Umehara's been on an upswing this year, with regular top-eight placements at major tournaments. The month before Evo, he won England's VSFighting major, defeating some of the strongest players now reaching for their moment in fighting-game history, such as Fujimura Atsushi and Sim "NL" Gun. It's still early in the Evo bracket, and Umehara doesn't seem phased as he handily takes the match.

Though he's become synonymous with Street Fighter's main hero, Ryu, Umehara credits the improvement to switching to Guile, a much stronger character. It wasn't an easy call, however. "Whether I can win [tournaments] or not depends on the strength of the character, but I didn't want to admit that," he explains.

Keita "Fuudo" Ai, one of Umehara's close friends in the scene as well as his current teammate, encouraged him to switch, believing he wouldn't be able to place well consistently if he stuck to Ryu. "I wanted him to be the best of himself that he could be, and I'm really happy that he switched over to Guile," he says. However hard the decisions might have been, it's hard to argue with the results.

Grand Master Challenge

Though Umehara finishes his early matches on Friday, he still has work to do. As soon as he walks off the tournament stage and onto the convention floor, fans hoping to get a picture or his signature on their arcade stick begin clustering around him.

As his prominence in the community exploded, autographs and photos became a regular staple of Umehara's experiences abroad, which at first made him bashful. "I come from the arcade scene, where we played against each other, but it's not like people came up to me and asked for an autograph or anything like that," he says.

Umehara understands his unique position as someone who can make a living playing a fighting game. While he's fully sponsored, makes deals to promote game peripherals, and sells books, those things are only possible because people are inspired by his story and aspire to be like him. "When they come up to me, sometimes I'm tired or rushing to the next place, but I remember quickly, 'Oh, I have to treat them well, because I'm here because of them.'"

After signing several autographs, he heads back to his base of operations: the booth for Cygames, Evo 2018's biggest sponsor. Part of the sponsorship includes the creation of Umehara's latest team, Cygames Beast, which includes several top players from around the world.

Next on his schedule is playing an hour of exhibition matches with fans onstage, who have a chance to win a headset if they can beat him. To fight them, he puts on his newly minted Cygames Beast jacket, which reads "DAIGO THE BEAST" and bears an image of Ryu on its back. For the challengers, it's a chance to fight someone who could make their day just by beating them. This time around, however, no one gets a free headset.

Though it's taken him time to adapt to Street Fighter V, Umehara enjoys playing it and thinks it's come a long way in terms of balance. He still thinks it could use a bit of work, though. "The old-timers like myself would like to see defensive acts be rewarded," he says.

That said, the positives outweigh the negatives for Umehara, especially when it comes to expanding the reach of the fighting-game community. "The simplicity of Street Fighter V allows players from all over the world to come to tournaments, and they can have a chance to win," he explains. "Before that, the environment, whether they had access to arcades, whether they have access to the internet, all of those things mattered... but regionality doesn't matter too much anymore, and that's a good thing for the community."

The New Generation

The next morning, Umehara is running at full speed to his next match. Separate from Evo's convention area (which hosts the Cygames booth) is a sea of numbered game stations for each of the tournament's mainline games, and station 101 needs Umehara before it can play out its next match.

At this point in the tournament, most aspiring amateurs have been culled, leaving only prominent players to battle it out for a spot in the finals. Each station is immensely crowded as former contenders-turned-spectators huddle around top players like Justin Wong, Alex Valle, Hajime "Tokido" Taniguchi, and Ryan Hart, as well as Umehara's own teammates like Ai. Many of these competitors are also friends, having spent enough time playing Street Fighter together that they're watching each other out of genuine curiosity as much as to pick up on potential weaknesses.

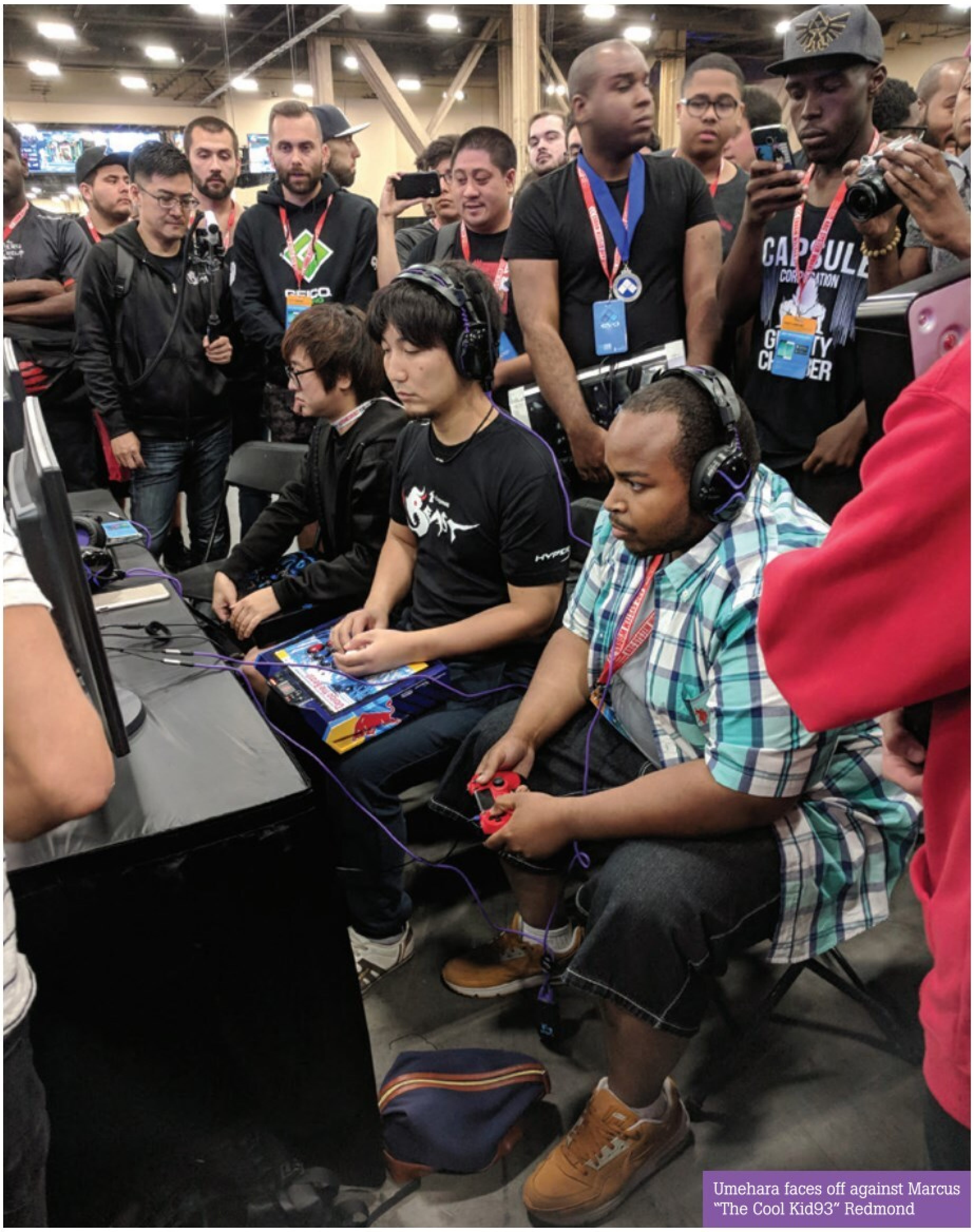
It's especially important to watch players they're not familiar with. Throughout the years, dozens of favorites have fallen to relative unknowns, so even the best players have to watch their backs. At a tournament the size of Evo, the field is your biggest opponent. While Umehara is famous for his ability to hone in on a single player (he's undefeated in longform exhibition matches as of late), the field always hosts a few surprises.

As a ring of spectators obscures the view of Umehara's matches, I'm able to catch one by peeking at the phone screen of someone standing on a chair. Umehara is playing against Marcus "The Cool Kid93" Redmond, an up-and-comer with a few notable tournament placements under his belt. He plays Abigail, a screen-filling grappler Umehara isn't too familiar with. Redmond, on the other hand, is intimately familiar with Guile. He's confident about winning, but tells me he has to tune out that Umehara is his opponent. "That's the easiest way to lose," he says. "You psych yourself out, [thinking] 'This specific thing won't work because it's Daigo.'"

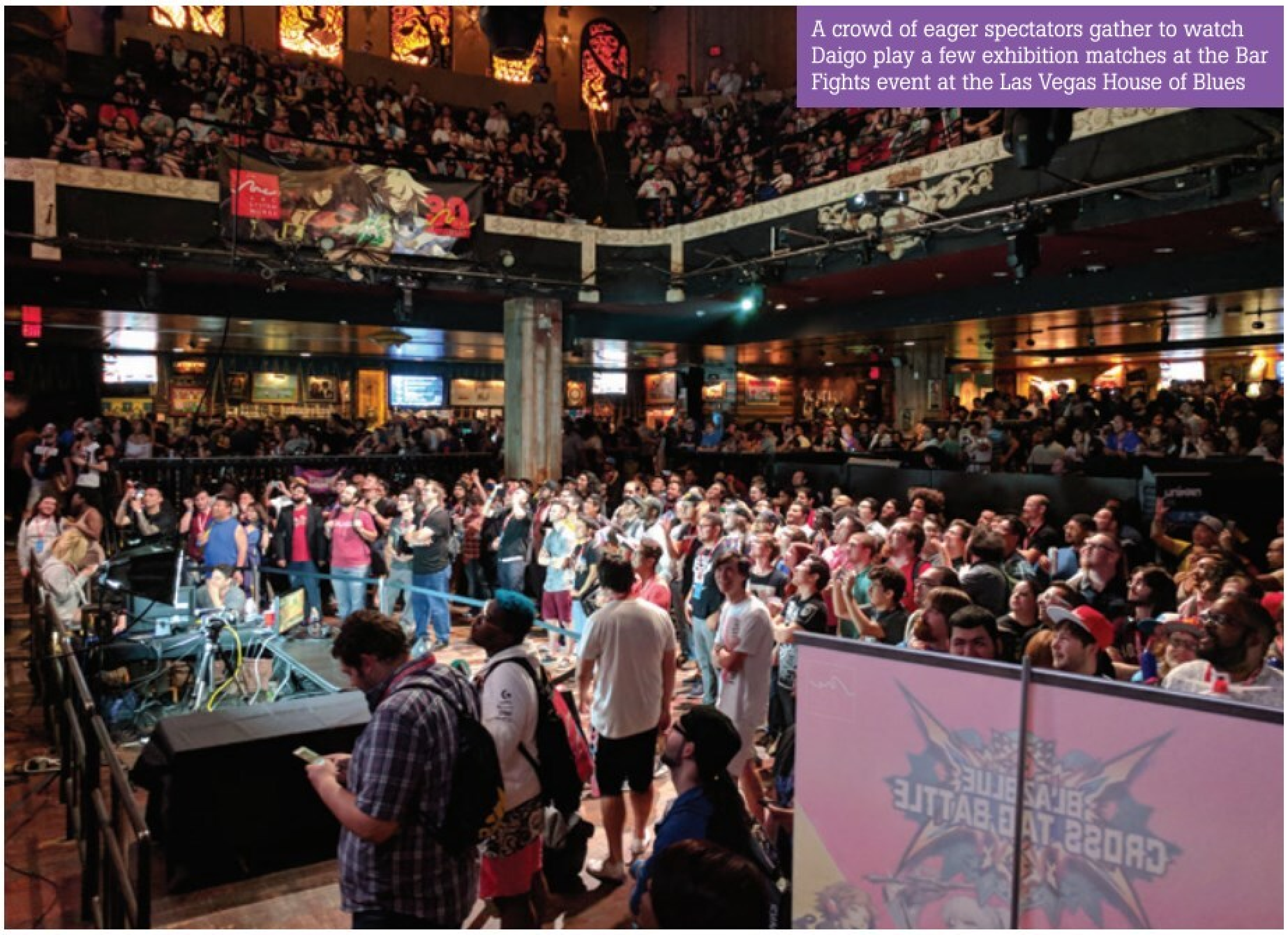
Their set is fairly intense, but Umehara's lack of experience facing Abigail is clear. While he's able to keep him away with his regular flurry of sonic booms, Abigail can easily close the distance, and Redmond regularly cooks up some surprising mixups that catch Umehara off guard. As Redmond continues to take more rounds off Umehara, the crowd begins to cheer louder and louder. Some of Redmond's friends are in the audience, cheering him on. Eventually, Redmond takes the set. The crowd erupts at the upset. "I'm texting his wife," someone in the crowd yells.

Redmond is ecstatic about beating him, particularly because he had had a close encounter with him earlier in the year at CEO, the last major event before Evo, but Redmond ended up losing before he could face him. "To beat him here, it was just indescribable," he tells me.

After the loss, Umehara has some time to regroup and can watch a few matches on stage, away from the crowded stations. Since Evo is a double-elimination tournament, he's technically still alive. His next opponent is Toi Bridges, an M. Bison player from Texas. The Bison/Guile matchup is a bit of a tossup for both players, but Umehara takes the set with ease.



Umehara faces off against Marcus "The Cool Kid93" Redmond



A crowd of eager spectators gather to watch Daigo play a few exhibition matches at the Bar Fights event at the Las Vegas House of Blues

His next match is against Cristhoper "Caba" Rodriguez, a player from the Dominican Republic. Umehara jokes that his odds are 50-50 – Rodriguez also plays Guile. Umehara's aware of Rodriguez. "He's a well-balanced player, he's not as reckless as so many other young players may be," he says.

The match starts up squarely in Umehara's favor, as he's able to read Rodriguez' approaches between sonic-boom exchanges and counter them while exerting his own pressure, taking the first game. Normally, this would lead an opponent to change up their style to compensate for how they lost, but Rodriguez maintains his course, unafraid to take risky bets, even when he's punished for them. This takes Umehara by surprise, and this strategy begins to pay off. Rodriguez eventually takes the match. Umehara is now just another spectator, tying for 13th place in Evo 2018, putting him just out of reach of the finals tomorrow.

If Umehara's elimination takes away from his esteem as a player, his fans either don't know or don't care. Having made room in his schedule to make it all the way to the finals, he's got some time on his hands, which means being able to take lots more photos with fans. Then he heads off for Bar Fights, a series of exhibition matches at the House of Blues where he's got top billing later that night. By the time all is said and done, only one of the Beast team, Ai, makes it to the finals.

BeasTV

In 2016, Daigo Umehara started up his own Twitch channel, BeasTV, which started when he and a few of his friends were batting around ideas for something fun to do together. They landed on the idea of doing a regular streaming show, which involved having top Street Fighter V players come on and play sets while Umehara and Ai interspersed the stream with a variety-show feel by having different segments.

In its first year, it was a heavy time commitment for Umehara. "I had to be the star of the show, and I wanted to be the planner, so I was involved in everything," he says. "And also we were experimenting, what sticks, what works for us and the audience... I spent so much time in the first year, but the second year we found the right format." BeasTV began adding regular segments, such as the now-popular Kemonmichi exhibition format in which Umehara and other high-profile players face off in the first-to-ten sets. Umehara's also started doing some casual streams at home, which lets him be more flexible with his time. "I can focus more on competitive gaming as well as those big events," he says. "I have more time to spend. It's been so much fun."

World Warriors

Cygames Beast may only have one member partaking in the finals, but that doesn't mean Cygames itself is taking a break from the event. When I meet up with Umehara, he has a couple of things to take care of before rooting for Ai in the finals. He's scheduled for interviews throughout the day, mostly taking place near a box-seat suite the Cygames crew is holed up in.

There are also plans for Umehara to conduct a backstage livestream using a streaming backpack made by Twitch, which allows him to easily broadcast to thousands of viewers (see sidebar). Umehara's path through Evo's backstage takes him to the room where the final eight contenders in Street Fighter V await their turn on stage as they watch the Dragon Ball FighterZ finals unfold. Redmond and Rodriguez, the two players who defeated Umehara, are both here. Both are relatively recent upstarts in the world of competitive Street Fighter, the kinds of competitors who now get to demonstrate their strength due to the wider accessibility of Street Fighter V.

Street Fighter V is, like many modern fighting games, part of a slow but steady trend. Where Japanese players previously dominated Evo's top placements, competitors outside the nation have begun questioning the previously set-in-stone commandment that Japanese players are king of the genre. In four of the five finals today (excluding Super Smash Bros. Melee, which has a long history of Western dominance), prominent American players have made strides to show the home team is nothing to scoff at. Dominique "SonicFox" McLean, a fighting-game prodigy who's been taking the scene by storm, further reinforces this notion when he overcomes Goichi "GO1" Kishida to become the world champion in FighterZ.

Umehara is fully aware of this growing trend, and acknowledges the rise of international players. Ai is aware of it as well, and even credits it for Umehara's recent upswing, if indirectly. As players like Korea's Lee "Infiltration" Seon-woo and America's Du "NuckleDu" Dang were taking major events like Evo and Capcom Cup, the Japanese community felt left behind. "That woke us up and made us realize just because arcades are dying out and [Street Fighter V] isn't available in the arcade scene doesn't mean we can't practice together," he says.

Japanese players began organizing more readily, meeting up several times a week to play and practice together, creating a new training ground. "I think that's the biggest reason that Daigo has also improved," Ai says. It seems Umehara was right: As the world of Street Fighter diversifies, it produces a tide that gives everyone the motivation they need to improve, and Umehara has helped galvanize his local community to keep up.

Champion Addition

Once Street Fighter V's finals are under way, Umehara and the rest of Cygames Beast's roster are seated in the front row. In their hands are cardboard cutouts of Ai, which they use to cheer for him whenever he's mentioned or up on stage.

The event takes frequent breaks between matches, cutting to “blast from the past” matches from previous Evo tournaments. One of them, of course, is that famous match between Umehara and Justin Wong. Though he's watched the match dozens of times by now, and discussed it *ad nauseum* during interviews, watching it with a crowd of that size, which once again erupts during the pivotal moment, is new for him. “I felt grateful and glad it was something people enjoyed so much,” he says.

As the rest of the finals progress, one player captures his path to glory: Benjamin “Problem X” Simon, a longtime UK player who manages to retain his undefeated streak against the likes of Ai and last year's champion, Taniguchi. Ai ends up finishing third. Simon becomes the first player outside Asia to win the Street Fighter V championship, and the first person from the UK to ever take the title in the Street Fighter series. Try as Japan may have to recollect themselves and build a stronger scene, it seems the field has overtaken them for now.

While Simon has managed to carve his own path in the world of Street Fighter today, some small trace of Umehara's legacy is a part of his story. Simon began taking Street Fighter seriously after watching a match between Umehara and Hart, two of the first professional Street Fighter players in the world. Hart is from the UK as well, which made Simon believe players from his region could compete. “It was amazing to me that this guy was on the same level as Daigo, and he won that set,” Simon tells me.

For his part, Umehara is proud of his team's overall performance at their first Evo outing – most teams don't get anyone from their side to place in the finals, let alone third. But for now, it's back off to Japan to examine his losses and keep training. He may not have made his mark this year, but that's no reason for him to stop anytime soon. Capcom Cup, the other prestigious Street Fighter V tournament, worth over $250,000, is at the end of the year, and Umehara still has enough points from winning events throughout the year to qualify for it. This means he'll have to level up, lick his wounds, and prepare for his next opponent.

A Warrior's Dream

While Olympic athletes can clutch championships before they can legally drink, many fade into obscurity in the years that follow. Umehara could have had that same problem. “When I started playing Street Fighter II, at age 11, I loved it so much that I saw myself as becoming world champion,” Umehara says. “And pretty soon, that dream came true.”

But over the years, he's been able to find new reasons to keep playing, improve, and hone his skills as a Street Fighter master. For one, it's his job. “Competitions and tournaments are still the primary reason for much of Daigo's travel and public appearance, so in that basic sense, it's what his sponsors are paying for,” Killian tells me. Fighting games haven't quite reached the point to where Umehara could retire and become a coach or panelist on a TV show. To keep his name out there, he has to compete.

Beyond his own personal gain, however, that Umehara continues to compete matters. As many of esports' most prominent players age, it's important for him to prove playing video games competitively is a career, not just something you do until you age out. And as players like Redmond and Simon climb the ranks, having someone from the old guard to test themselves against acts as a motivator; what's cooler than saying you beat Daigo Umehara at Street Fighter?

But when I ask Umehara why he's still playing, he tells me he's holding a torch for people who had to give up on their dreams. “10 years ago, there were different guys that used to play against me at the arcade, and now they're gone, they're not playing,” he says. “But they're still great supporters of mine, and they root for me. And five years ago there was another group of guys who used to play... [so] I look at myself as a sort of representative of each generation.” So while he may not have taken the crown at Evo this year, Umehara, more than 20 years after becoming the world champion of Street Fighter, still very much has a fire lit under him. ◆

Benjamin “ProblemX” Simon poses for the camera after taking first place at this year's Evo

THE NINTENDO SWITCH LOOKS TOWARD 2019

The Switch had a stellar first year and a half. First-party games like The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild and Super Mario Odyssey helped buoy its success early on. In the months that followed, the platform became a haven for indies. In the months ahead, Nintendo will start bringing back its classics through a new online subscription service. The year ends with a bang in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, and Nintendo is already outlining plans for 2019. We don't know if the previously announced Pokémon, Metroid Prime 4, and Bayonetta 3 will release next year, but they hopefully aren't too far off. Even if those titles push another year, Nintendo already has a well-rounded lineup for players in 2019.

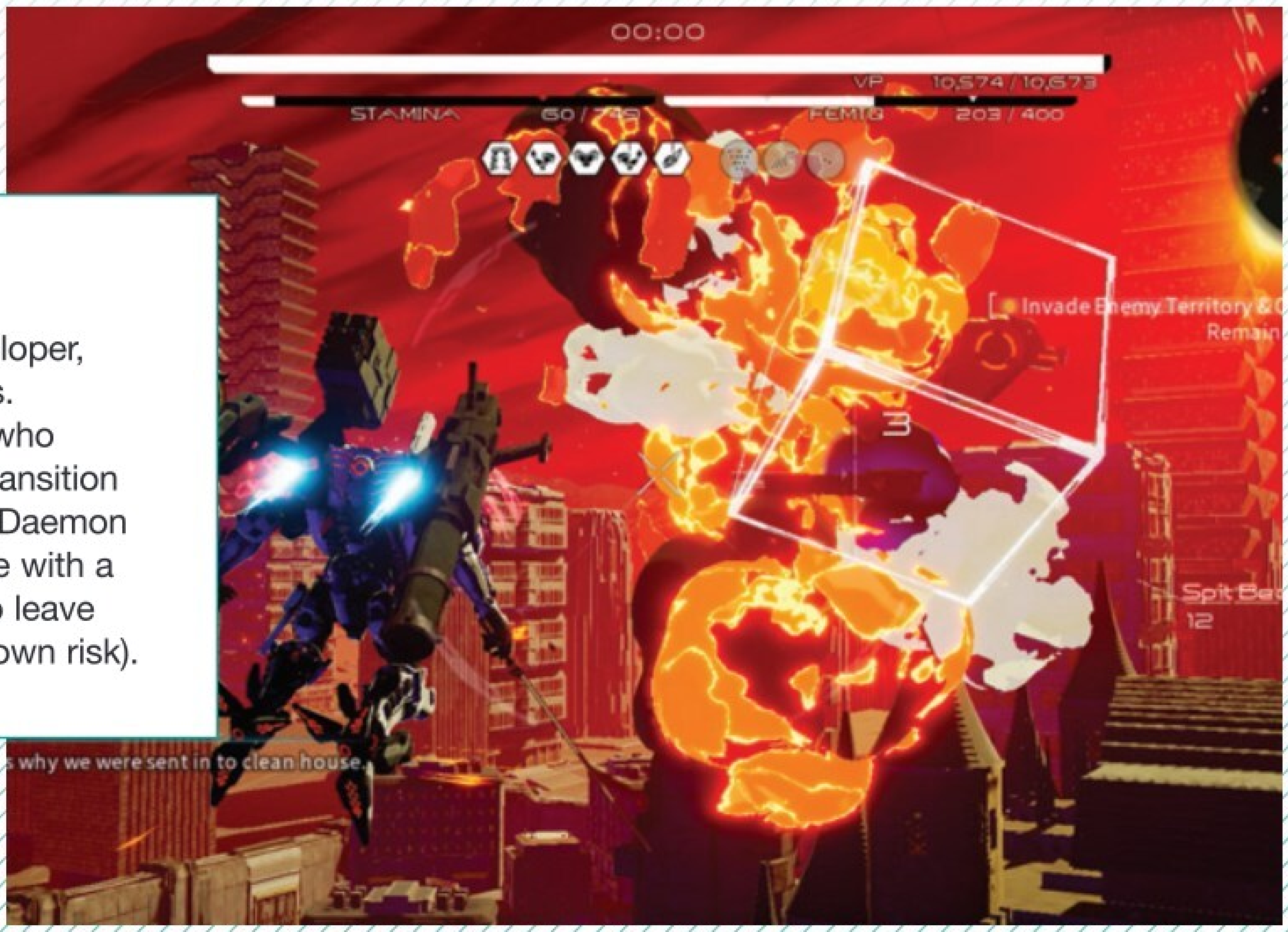
by Kyle Hilliard

Animal Crossing

Of all the mysteries surrounding 2019's Switch releases, Animal Crossing is perhaps the most intriguing. The game was revealed during a Nintendo Direct after a fake-out that announced Isabelle, your helpful partner in Animal Crossing: New Leaf, would be a fighter in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. However, the end of the trailer revealed Tom Nook sitting at a desk with a Switch on it. With the disclaimer, "Not actual gameplay footage" displaying on the bottom of the screen, Nook turned off his computer monitor to say, "I've got to make sure everyone has a nice, new place to come home to when they're ready, yes?" At that point, the familiar Animal Crossing logo appeared on screen with the numbers 2019 below it. We don't know what will set the Switch Animal Crossing apart from its predecessors, what it will be called, or what it will even look like, but we do know it is coming and it will arrive in 2019, pending any delays.

Daemon X Machina

Daemon X Machina marks a change in direction for its co-developer, Marvelous, whose library contains mostly Harvest Moon games. However, the development aid of producer Kenchiro Tsukuda, who has history with the Armored Core series, makes us think the transition won't be a problem. You can read a more in-depth preview for Daemon X Machina on page 73, but it's a high-speed mech-action game with a unique art style, lots of customization options, and the ability to leave your mech to participate in the battle from the ground (at your own risk).



Luigi's Mansion 3

The name may change before release, but a new Luigi's Mansion is coming to Switch next year. Unlike Animal Crossing, we at least know what Luigi's Mansion 3 looks like. Luigi is exploring a new haunted house with his trusty vacuum cleaner in order to capture ghosts as the spirits do their best to scare the pants off the panicked brother. The brief gameplay Nintendo shared showed a plunger-shooting ability, a ghost dog, and a suitcase emblazoned with a big red "M." Is Luigi trying to save his brother from a vacation gone awry?

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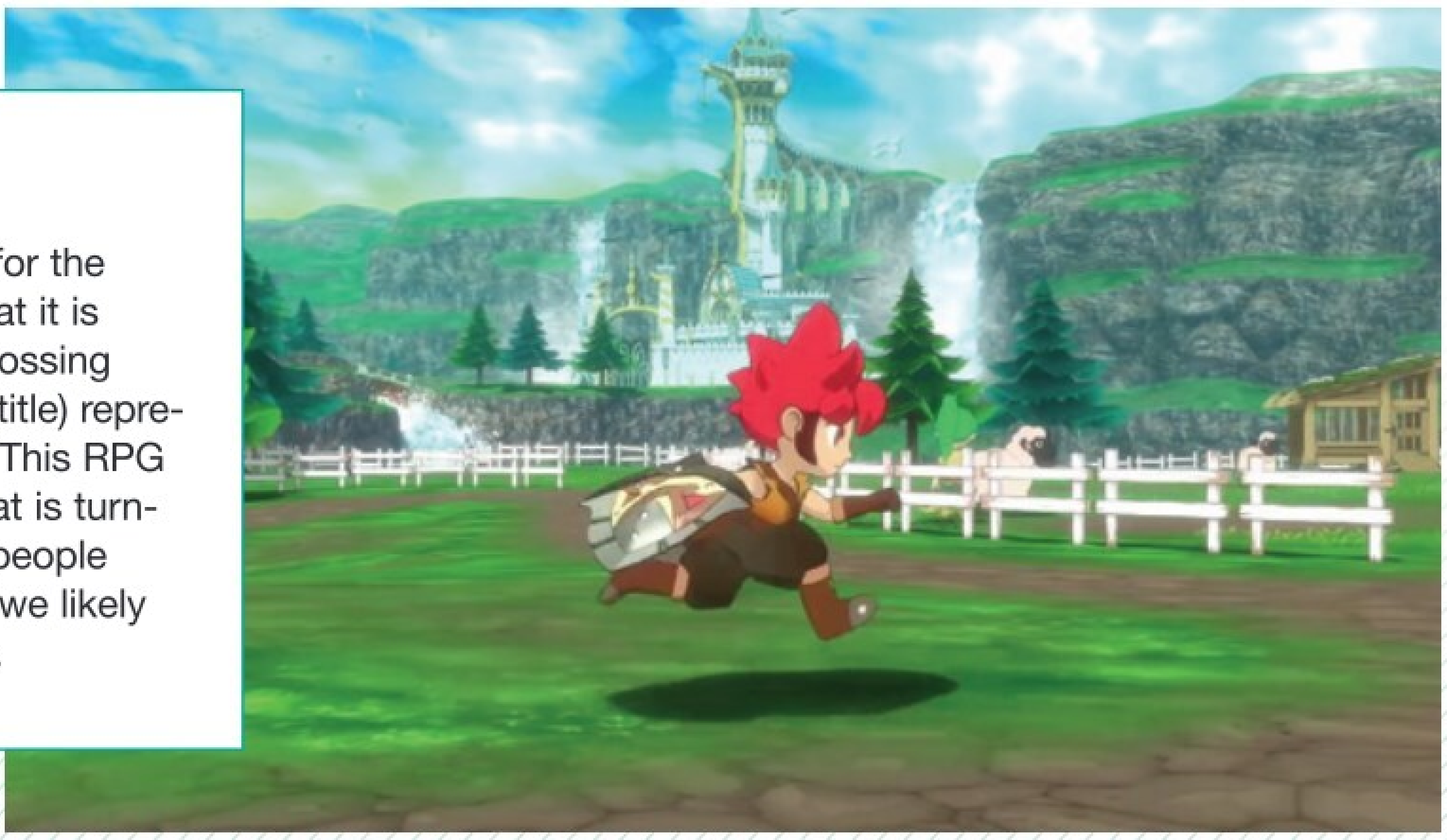
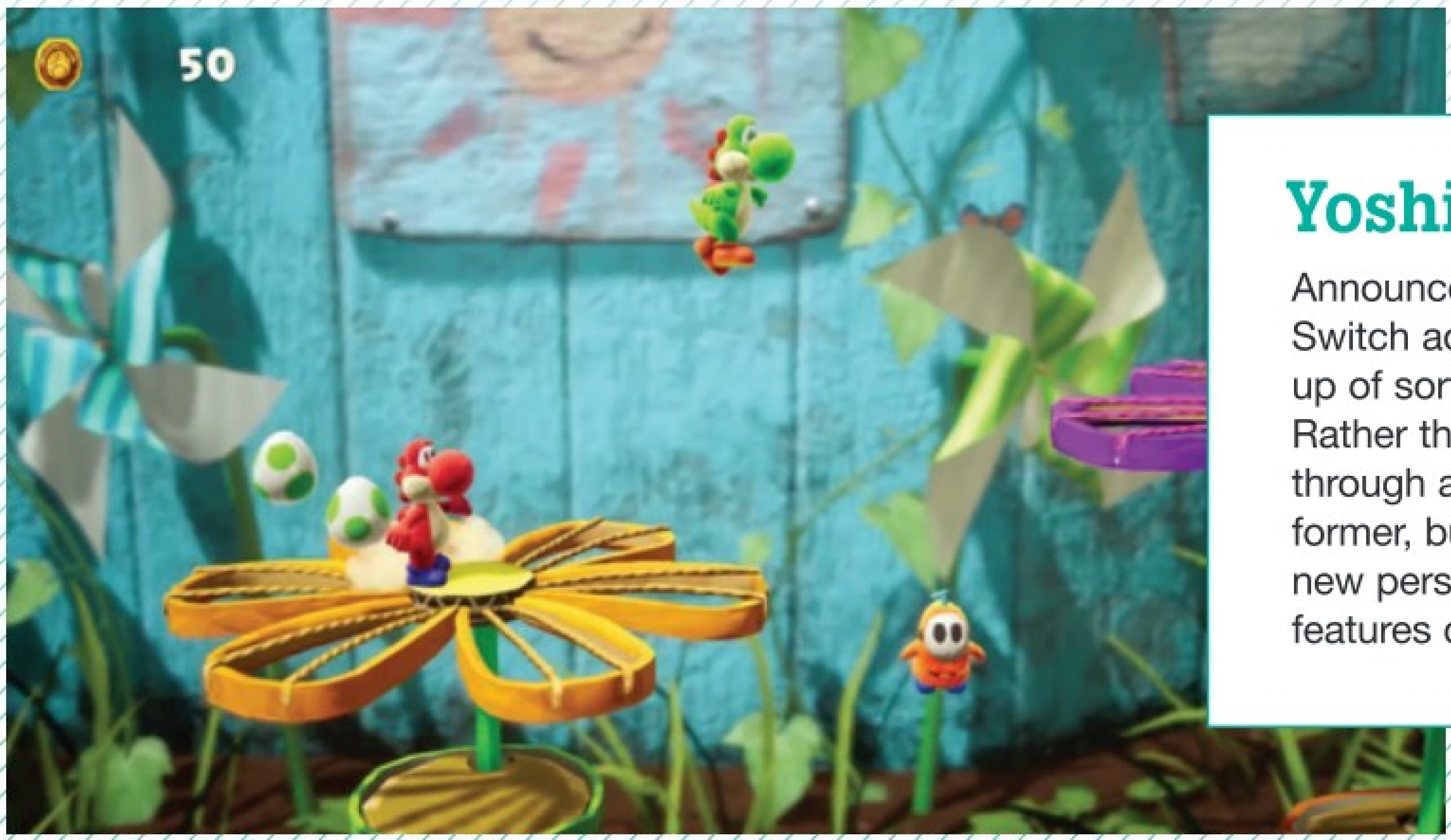
New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe

The Wii U launch title is getting a second chance on Switch on January 11. New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe also includes the full New Super Luigi U game, expanded playable options for Nabbit (who was playable in Super Luigi U previously), and the addition of Toadette as a playable character. Nabbit functions a little bit like Funky Kong did in Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze for Switch. He doesn't take damage, which makes him an easier character to use. Toadette can collect a crown to transform into Peachette (who I guess isn't Peach? It's confusing), which gives her the ability to double-jump, float, and recover when she falls in a pit.

Town

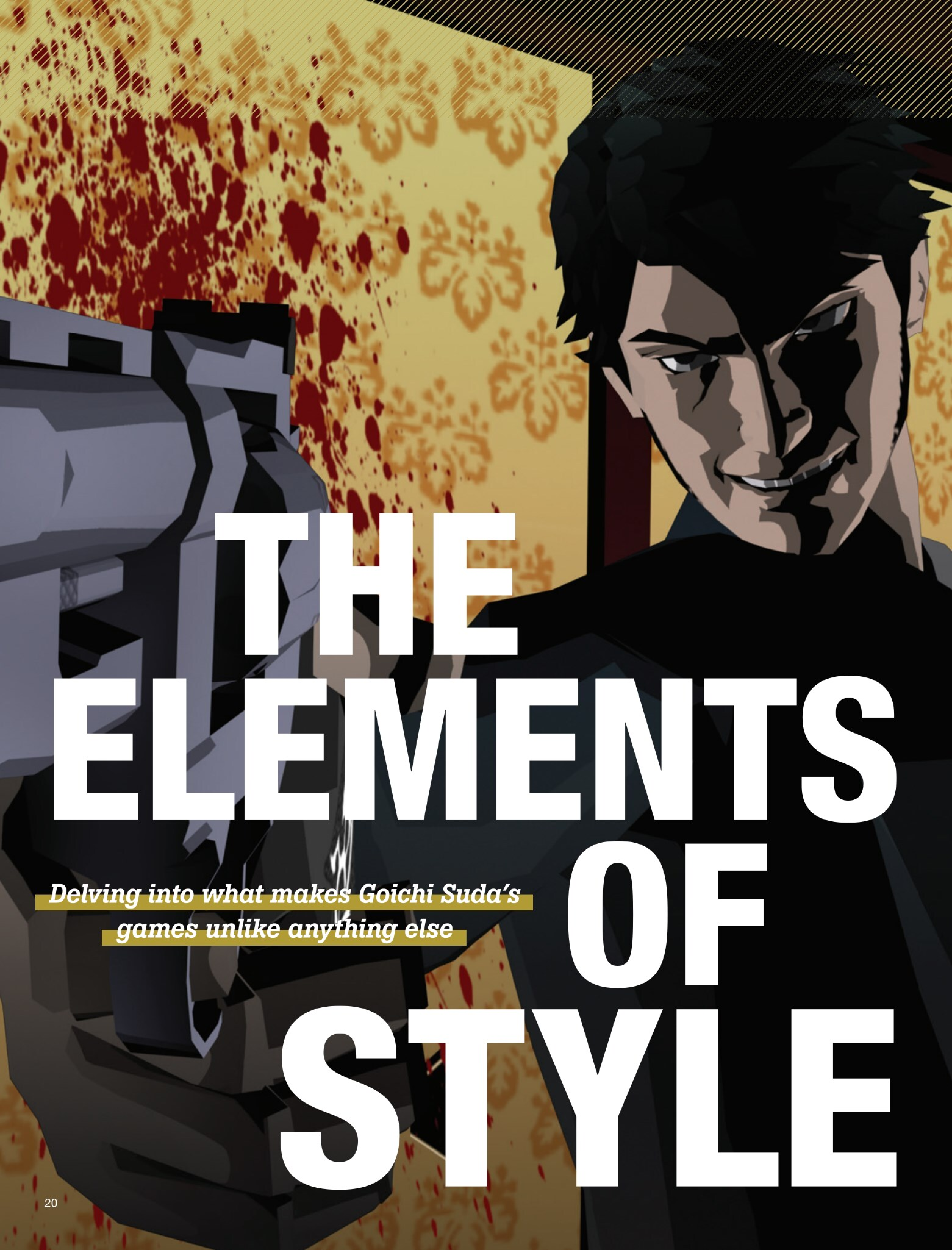
Game Freak is known predominantly (maybe even exclusively) for the Pokémon series. The studio has frequently proven, however, that it is a skilled developer even when it isn't working on the highest-grossing media franchise of all time. Town (which is the game's working title) represents the studio's rare exploration outside of pocket monsters. This RPG takes place in a village being attacked by monsters. The combat is turn-based, and you can call in assistance from the assorted townspeople as needed. The village is harboring some kind of secret, which we likely won't learn more about until we get a chance to play the game.





Yoshi's Crafted World

Announced as a 2018 title during its E3 debut, Yoshi's first dedicated Switch adventure got pushed back to Spring 2019. The game is a follow-up of sorts to the excellent Yoshi's Woolly World for Wii U and 3DS. Rather than exploring a world of yarn, however, Yoshi must adventure through a world made of cardboard and papercraft. It's still a 2.5D platformer, but you can now swing the camera around to see levels from new perspectives and take new routes. As Woolly World did, the game features co-op support as well. ◆



THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Delving into what makes Goichi Suda's games unlike anything else

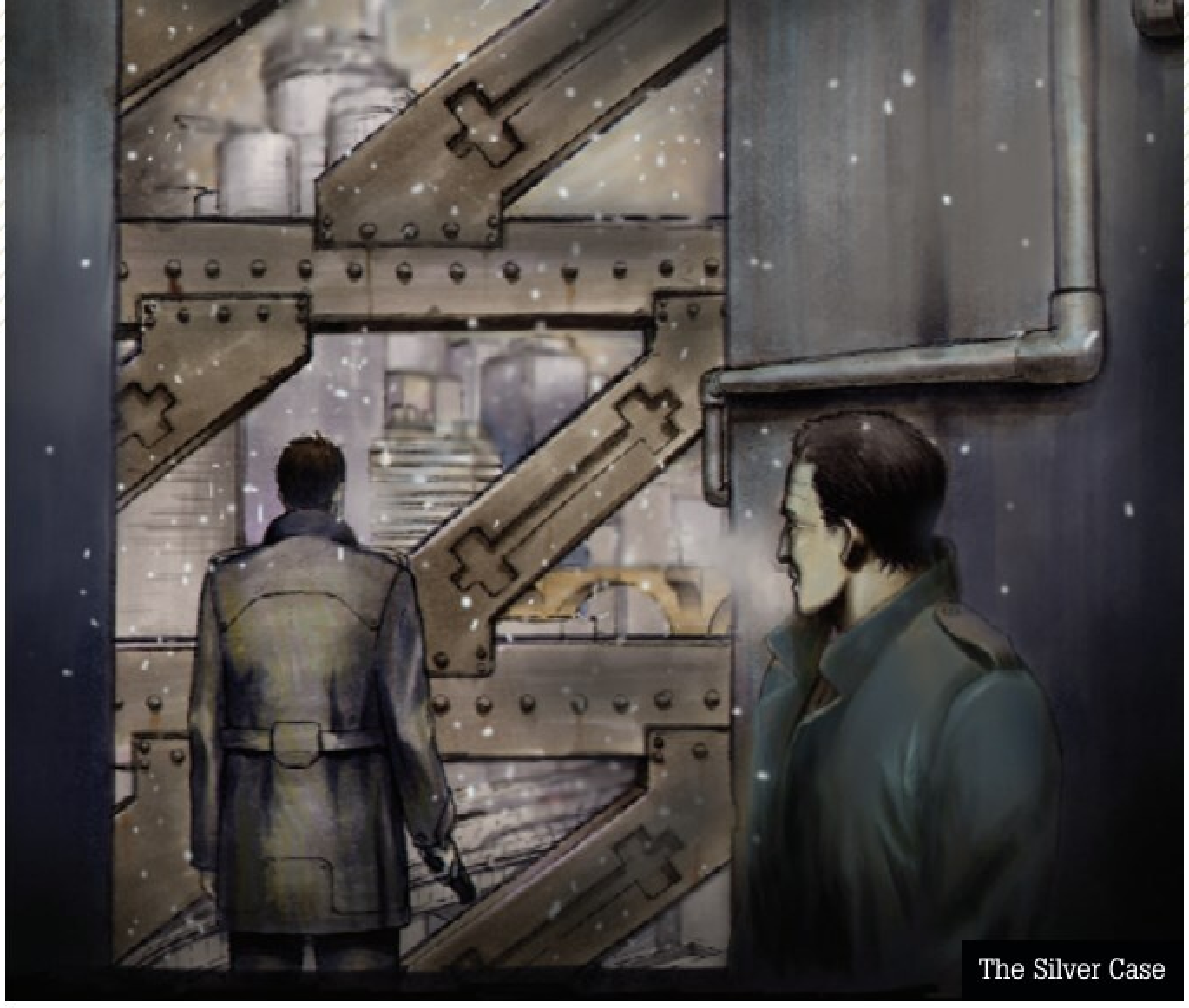
In many ways, it continued the nihilist violent streak of Moonlight Syndrome; in the wake of Kobe child murders, the government began to crack down on violent media, including video games. The Silver Case is a response to that, challenging the idea of reactionary, overbearing media control. "The Silver Case is an exploration of that, an answer to that, and a big reaction against what I was feeling when I created Moonlight Syndrome," Suda says.

For Grasshopper's next title, Flower, Sun, and Rain, Suda shifted gears. As a way to escape the dreariness of his previous work, he opted for a more tropical, light-hearted setting. "When I was a kid, actually, there was a lot of these movies being made in Japan that had a south-eastern island setting for the movie," he explains. "*Umitsubame Jyo No Kiseki* was one in particular that kind of stands out in my mind."

Although Flower, Sun, and Rain had a much more whimsical tone, there's little doubt it's still a "Suda game." As Sumio Mondo, you must get through several *Groundhog Day*-like loops by solving a string of numbers-based puzzles while you explore a mystical island to try to stop a plane with a bomb on it from taking off. Its quirky tone is frequently punctured by somber and wistful moments, leading up to the reveal that each loop has a more sinister significance than players might have expected.

The shift from The Silver Case to Flower, Sun, and Rain also marked Grasshopper's first attempt at making a game with a fully-controllable character. "The truth is that we didn't internally have the know-how to make a game with a playable character, so we knew that we had to approach things step-by-step," Suda says. Even at this early stage, however, Suda saw Flower, Sun, and Rain as part of a longer learning process to eventually create the kinds of games he'd always wanted to make, ones with less writing and more action.

The action games Suda wanted to make required more manpower than one director could handle. Grasshopper soon developed a second line of production, focusing on small projects not headed by Suda himself. The first of these was the Shining Soul series, spearheaded by a new hire from Squaresoft (now Square Enix) named Akira Ueda, whose clear vision and drive helped fuel more projects at Grasshopper. Although all of Grasshopper's games had carried Suda's unique stamp and influence on them, Suda was happy to let other directors at the company branch out on their own. It gave him license to work more intensely on the "Suda games" he was most passionate about.

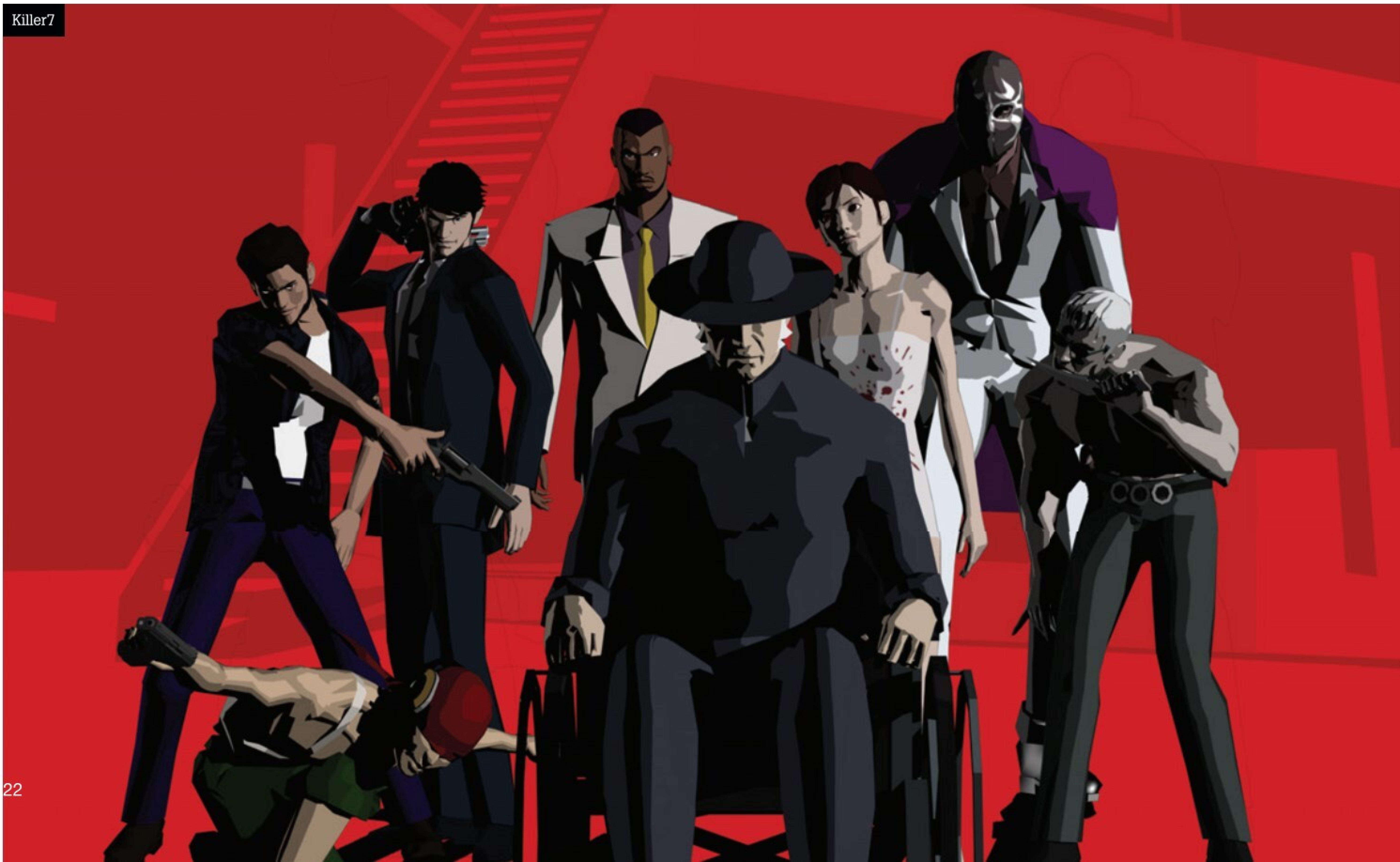


The Silver Case

A KILLER ENTRANCE

As Grasshopper continued to grow and release cult titles, Suda's reputation in the Japanese development scene grew as well, eventually catching the eye of Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami. According to Suda, Mikami first heard about him through a fellow Human alumni Hifumi Kono, director of the Clock Tower series. "Mr. Mikami really respected the work that Human did overall as a company," Suda says. "They were always making these really new, cutting-edge games, so much so that [Mikami] would tell his development staff, 'I want you guys to reference what was made by Human when we make games.'"

Mikami was then overseeing the Capcom Five (a group of five planned exclusive games for GameCube), and when Kono spoke well about Suda, Mikami arranged to discuss a new project with him. Among the 20 or so game pitches Suda had prepared for Mikami, one stood out. "It wasn't Killer7, but it used the same visual style as Killer7," Suda says. "It was kind of the continuation of Moonlight, almost. The idea at the time was pitched with kind of, in my mind at least, was an action-



Killer7

Artist Tokashi Miyamoto's character designs helped bring Suda's early works, like Flowers Sun, and Rain, to life

No More Heroes

adventure game, but maybe more on the adventure side... and when I took it to Mikami, he said, 'That's the one we should do.'"

Cel-shaded graphics were popular at the time, and not only did this prototype use cel-shading, but took inspiration from comic books, abstract art, and more to create an aesthetic that looked unlike anything else at the time. The control scheme was also unique, using the kind of stop-and-shoot mechanic that would later be seen in Resident Evil 4 (another of the Capcom Five), and forcing players onto rail-guided paths rather than giving them complete control of their characters. "Honestly it really came from the design of the GameCube controller," Suda says. "Searching with the left trigger and aiming with the right trigger. Just holding that controller, the kind of game it should be all came together."

It was unlike any other third-person shooter or adventure game at the time, and there was some pushback about the direction. "At one point someone had said, 'you know if you make movement in this game more of a conventional style, it'd probably sell three times as much,'" Suda says. "Then Mikami-san actually approached me and said, 'What do you want to do? Do you want it to be how you've been making it, with that gameplay style, or do you want it to be this more typical, orthodox way of controlling it?'" Suda decided to stick to his original vision and make the "Suda game" he wanted.

Killer7's release in 2005 was the first time Western audiences had received a real "Suda game," and the reception was mixed. While many took to its noir, surrealist, and geopolitical trappings, many criticized the incoherent story and strange controls. Others saw it as a cult masterpiece. "I remember getting repeated contacts from Capcom saying 'Hey, the game got this award.' 'Hey the game got this award, and this award.'" Suda tells me. It turned out the West was more receptive to his games than he thought.

Suda wasn't really aware of much other reception to Killer7 until he began promoting No More Heroes, the next major original project he helmed. "I did tours and things like that, and fans were like 'Ah, I can finally meet the guy who made Killer7!' So that's when it finally dawned me like, 'Okay, people kind of know who I am.'"

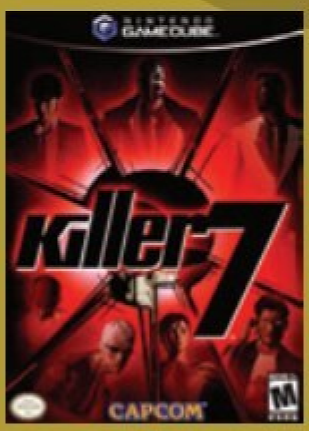
No More Heroes was a proper action game, building off the experience with the genre the studio had gotten with Blood+: One Night Kiss and Samurai Champloo: Sidetracked, two licensed games Grasshopper agreed to make for Bandai Namco. "In my mind, those three games are kind of like the Grasshopper Action Set, in terms of how they deal with the action gameplay," Suda says. No More Heroes was seen as the next "Suda game," and had many of his trademarks: Like Killer7, it showed an appreciation for pro wrestling, and the assassin ranking system was based on *El Topo*'s. It had a pulpier, more irreverent edge to it that mixed with its appreciation for American west coast architecture, but most fans recognized it clearly is another "Suda game," though what that meant would soon get murky.

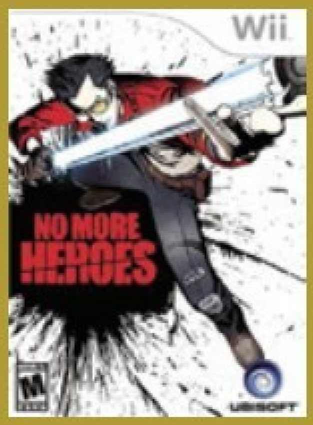
Grasshopper's Must-Play Games

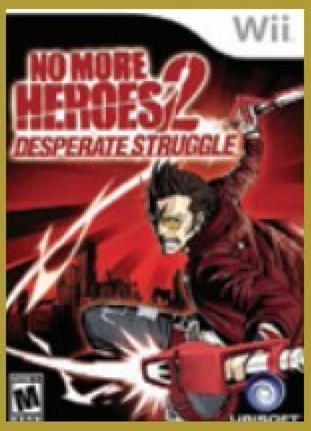
Grasshopper games can have some rough edges, but are usually worth playing. Here are the studio's best and weirdest works.

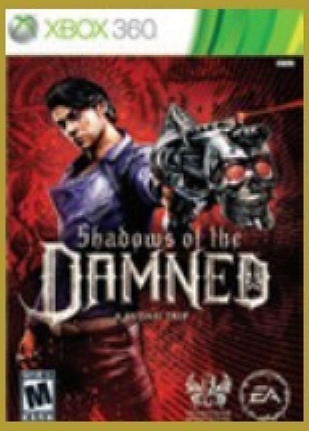
The Silver Case
(1999; PS4 2017)

Flower, Sun, and Rain
(2001)


Killer7
(2005)


No More Heroes
(2007)


No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle
(2010)


Shadows of the Damned
(2011)

Killer7

EXECUTIVE PRIVILEGE

By the time No More Heroes released in 2008, Grasshopper was larger than it had ever been. The "second line" had spawned multiple others, making it harder for Suda to give every Grasshopper title he worked on his full attention. He took a step back, choosing to oversee multiple projects outside of the director role and let others take the reins. "I still handled the creative side of things as well as overall executive producing," Suda says. "I wasn't able to realistically put myself into the team as a director."

The next group of major titles from the studio include various degrees of involvement from Suda. While he wrote the scenario for No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle, for example, Nobutaka Ichiki (assistant director on the first No More Heroes) stepped into the director role. "I probably ended up having maybe direct impact over like half of what came out," Suda says.

Although he still contributed to major parts of the next few Grasshopper titles, his overall influence is scattershot. He served as a writer on Shadows of the Damned while Massimo Guarini directed, despite the words "A Suda51 Trip" being printed on the Western box art. He co-directed Lollipop Chainsaw with Tomo Ikeda. He created the concept for and helped write Killer is Dead while Hideyuki Shin directed. He also contributed to Let it Die, though his involvement with it was more removed. "[It] was actually interesting, because I participated as like a normal-level worker," he says. "I wasn't in a directorial role or anything, and it was a very collaborative project, so it was really cool."

Despite his different degrees of involvement, he still sees all of these as "Suda games." "The games that get associated with me are rightfully associated with me," he says. "I might not have directed them, but Shadows of the Damned, Lollipop Chainsaw, and Killer is Dead are all titles that I specifically came up with the concept for, and so in a way they are my games."

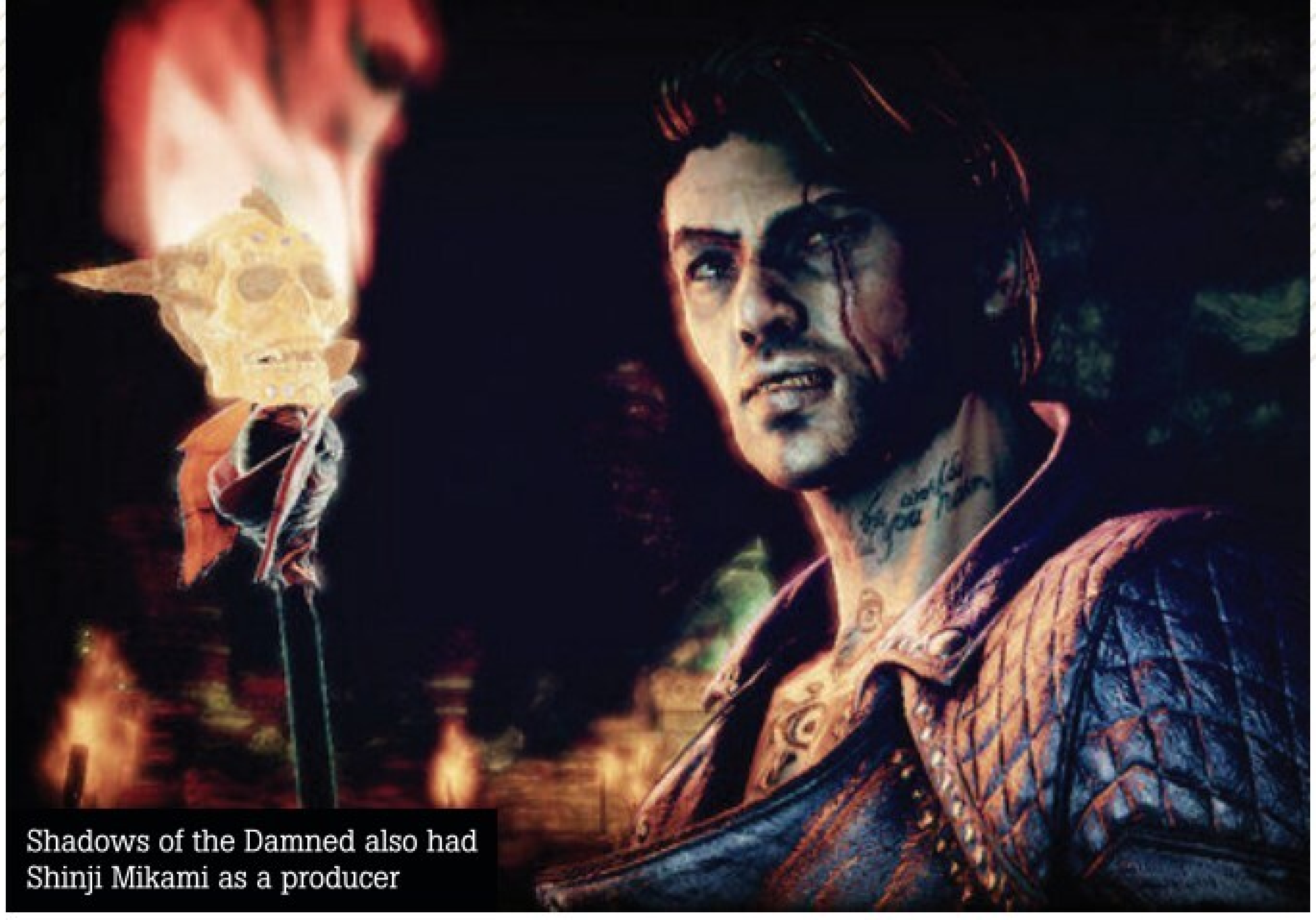
The change in style was hard to deny, however. Where The Silver Case, Flower, Sun, and Rain, were more methodical and focused on non-standard gameplay, his later games adapt a more cohesive framework which, while making them more accessible, made them seem less in keeping with Suda's original, more surreal stylings, a fact fans of his earlier works have lamented.

Suda, for his part, doesn't see himself going back. "I think it's important that as many people can play these games as possible," he says, citing the relative lack of interest in visual novels and adventure games. That said, he thinks he can strike a balance between the two styles in the future. "I'm convinced that there's still a way to make a game that can be narrative-focused, text-heavy, and yet still be more than clicking and reading," he says.

BACK IN THE HOPPER

Grasshopper's next game, Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes, is in part pitched as the first game Suda has fully directed in over 10 years. The circumstances that lead to that involve a series of events that converged to let Suda once again sit in the director's chair.

The first is the release of the popular indie game Hotline Miami. Suda quickly fell in love with its aesthetic and action, and saw it as a game very much in his vein. "When I found out it was by two people, Dennis [Wedin] and Jonathan [Söderström], it just blew my mind," Suda tells me. "They had jobs they normally worked and then at nights or whenever they had spare time they'd work on making that... In a way it reminded me of when I first started Grasshopper Manufacture." This work ethic inspired Suda to return to his roots, when he was working directly as the lead of a small team making a small game.



Shadows of the Damned also had Shinji Mikami as a producer

In January of 2013, Grasshopper was acquired by GungHo Online Entertainment, the Japanese developer and publisher responsible for Puzzle & Dragons. This eased some of the executive-level planning and decision-making Suda had to contend with as CEO of Grasshopper. "Because I have these strong people we're relying on within the GungHo group, the amount of time I need to necessarily devote to this kind of stuff is greatly reduced," he says. This freed up some time for him to work on more personal projects.

Finally, Grasshopper began revisiting its older games, starting with The Silver Case, which allowed Suda to remember a time when he was far more involved with the creative process. "Literally every frame of that game I touched and looked at," Suda says. That's something he hasn't had time to do in a while, and revisiting The Silver Case and Killer7 (which is also getting remastered this year), Suda realized he missed having that kind of control over a game.

This all led to him returning to direct Travis Strikes Again, which Suda plans to make the first part of his return in the director's chair at the studio he created.

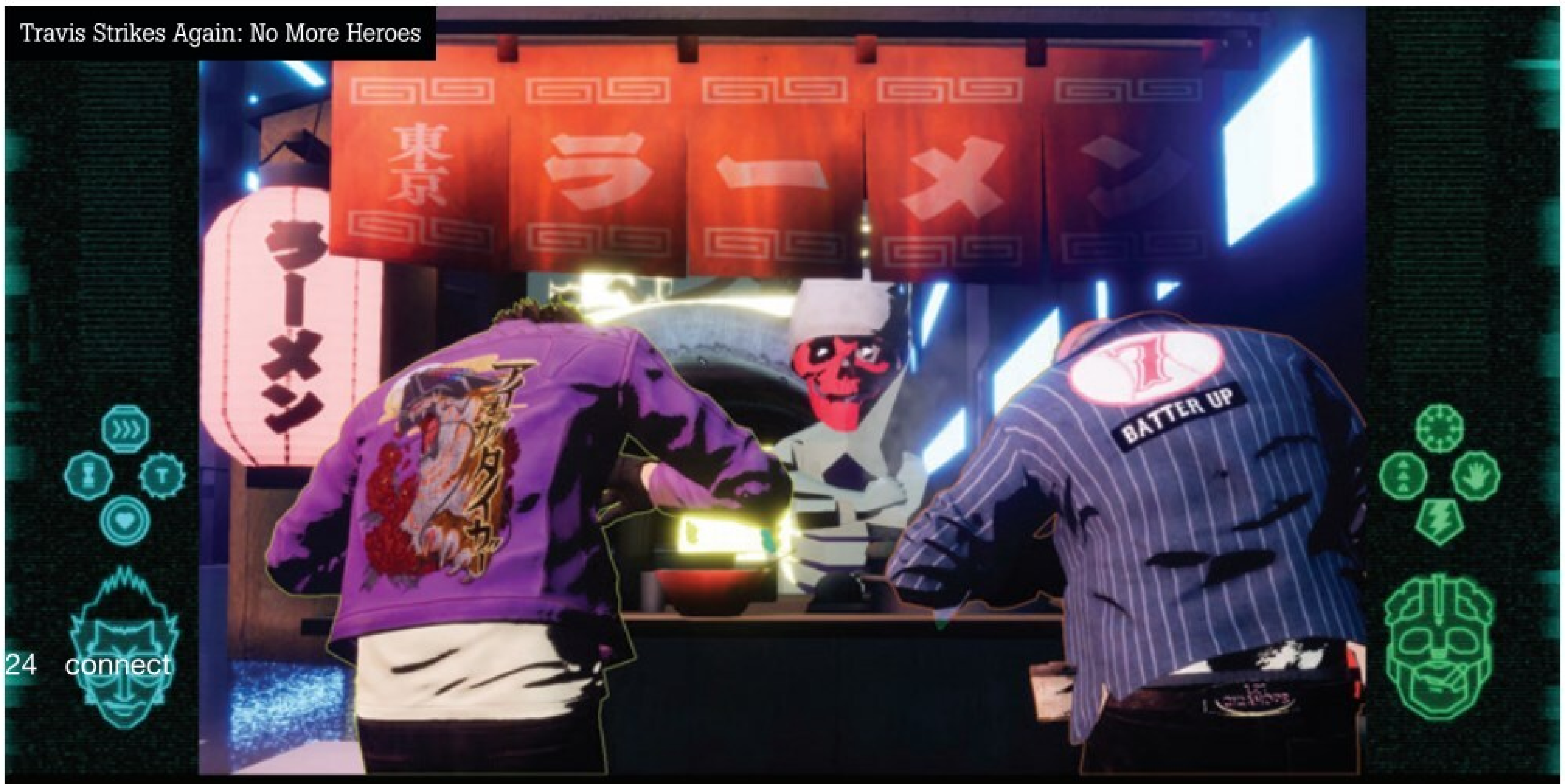
THE SHAPE OF SUDA TO COME

It's hard to know what, at this point, defines a "Suda game," aside from an overall feeling that they aren't quite like anything else. But as that definition continues to evolve, Suda has big plans for the future of Grasshopper. If Travis Strikes Again is successful, it would allow him to make No More Heroes 3, for example. Long-term, however, he'd like to return to something more in keeping with the studio's knack for creating original games instead of sequels. "I definitely want to create new IP that's well-received," he says. "I definitely want to get something that no one's ever seen before, with characters no one's ever seen before, out there."

He's also interested in further defining the idea of what a "Suda game" is in the first place, and continuing the process of passing that down to the many promising staff members at Grasshopper. "I think my core fans know when they pick up a [Grasshopper] game, probably just how much I participated, whether it be directorially, or some part of the process, they know," he says. "So I want to make every one of Grasshopper's games have my stamp on it, as it were, to be a 'Suda game.' So even if other people have directed it internally, I still think it's important that if it comes from Grasshopper, that it has this seal of mine on it."

Suda hopes to continue making games for as long as he lives, but also that the studio outlives him – he wants the company to continue for at least 100 years. "That obviously means kind of raising directors and nurturing them so they can do that and still maintain that Grasshopper stamp," he says. "It's important that I kind of transmit that to the staff, so that they can understand what a 'Suda game' is, and what makes it that, and give them that DNA so they can learn to do that too." ◆

Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes

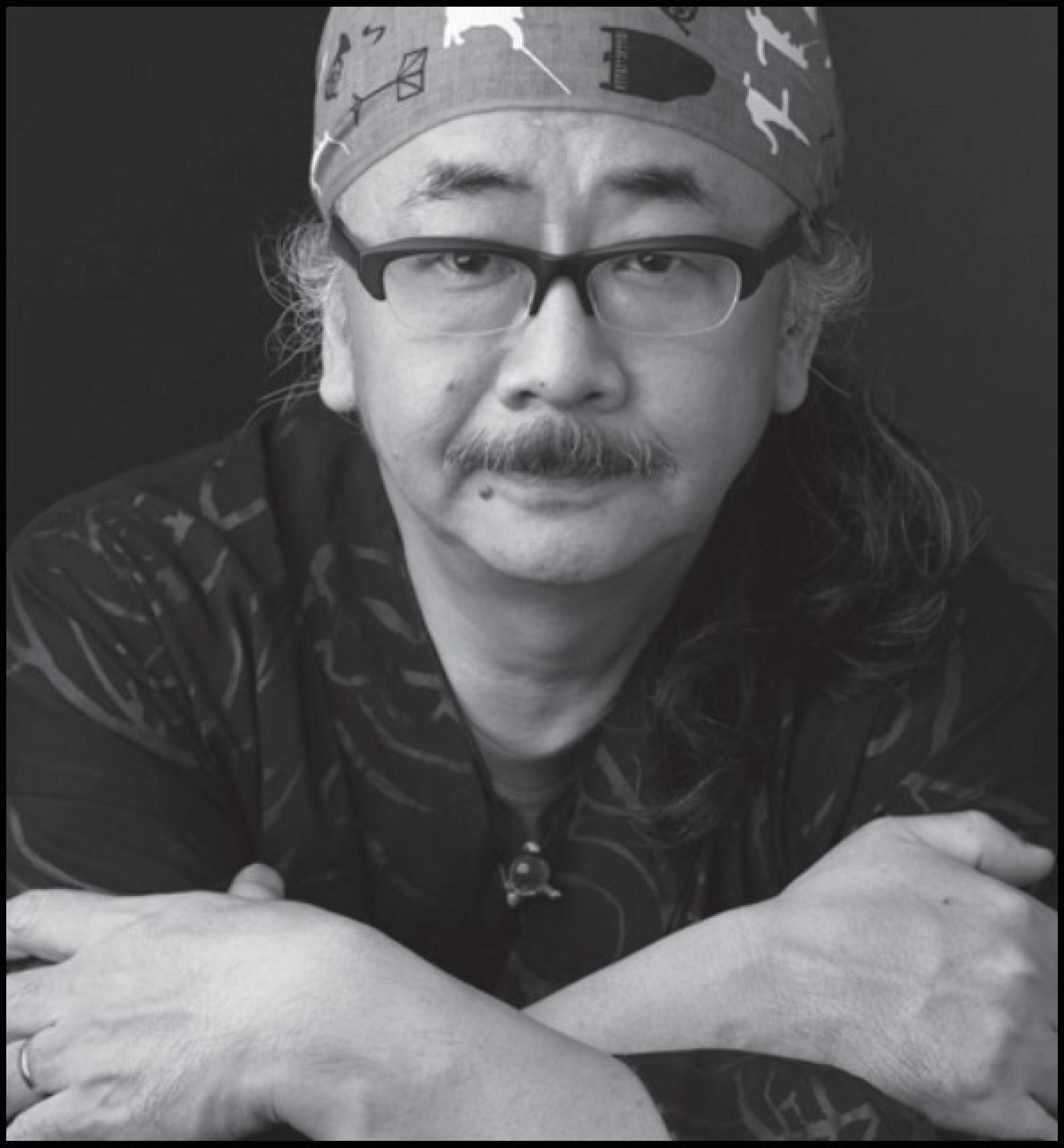


The Good

Fifteen European regulatory bodies (in Great Britain, Poland, Spain, and more) and the state of Washington have signed a declaration vowing to look into **GAMBLING AND VIDEO GAMES**. This pertains to both third-party reseller sites surrounding items in titles like Counter-Strike: GO as well as loot boxes in games like Overwatch and FIFA.

The Bad

Famed Final Fantasy and Square composer **NOBUO UEMATSU** is suspending future work due to an undisclosed illness that has been affecting him for the past few years. Hopefully he recovers soon.



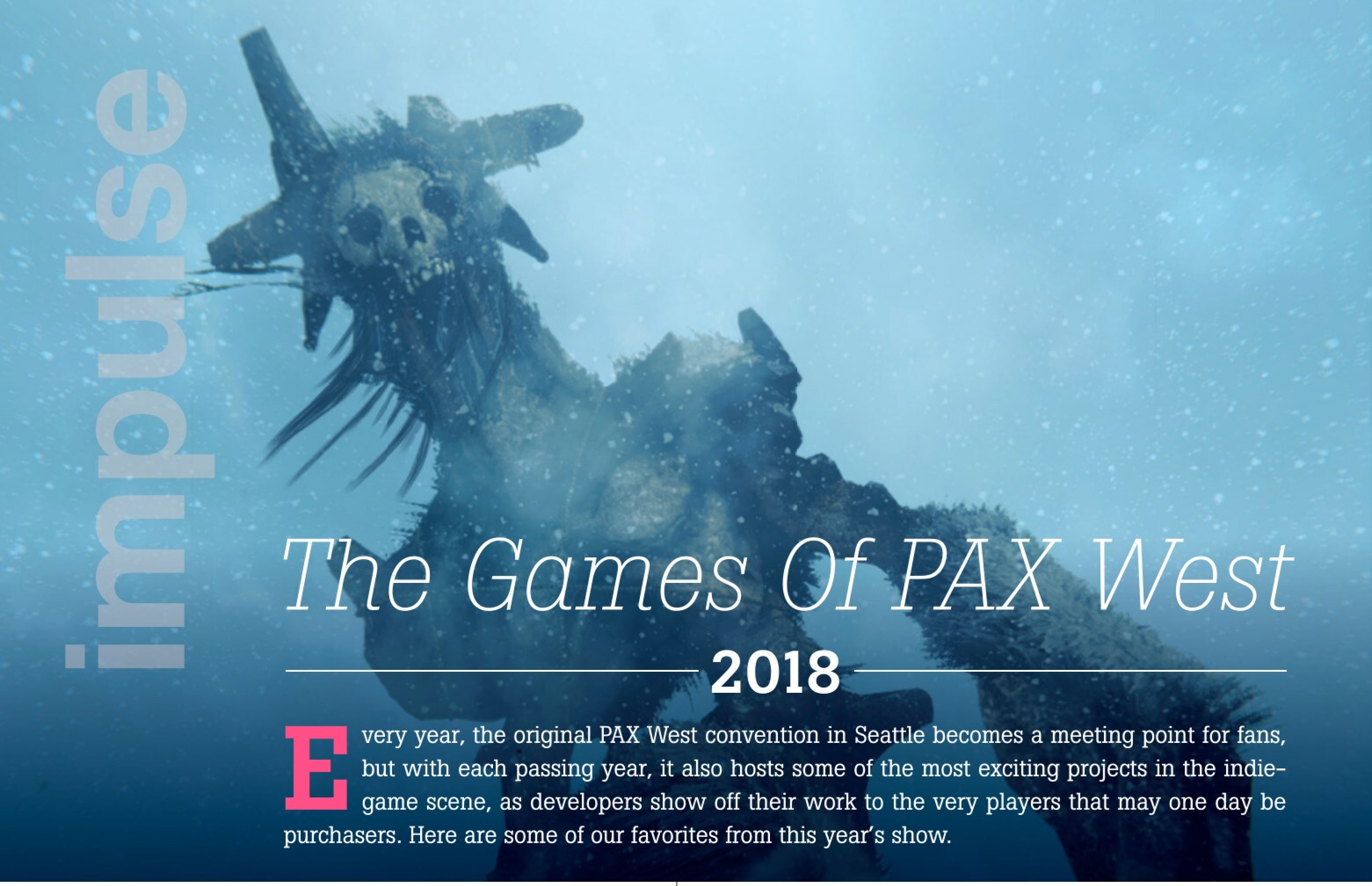
The Ugly

Two major studios were hit with massive layoffs in late September. Narrative adventure developer **TELLTALE GAMES** announced it was dismissing 225 of its 250 employees as the beginning of a "majority studio closure," while Capcom shut down Dead Rising series developer **CAPCOM VANCOUVER**, laying off 158 employees.

Quotable

"We're all here for the consumers. If you're going to create rules that don't benefit the consumers but somehow you think benefit your enterprise, you're mistaken. Consumers will go elsewhere. You have to pay attention to what the consumer wants."

Take-Two CEO **Strauss Zelnick** at the Goldman Sachs Communicopia Conference regarding cross-platform play and streaming gaming.



The Games Of PAX West

2018

Every year, the original PAX West convention in Seattle becomes a meeting point for fans, but with each passing year, it also hosts some of the most exciting projects in the indie-game scene, as developers show off their work to the very players that may one day be purchasers. Here are some of our favorites from this year's show.

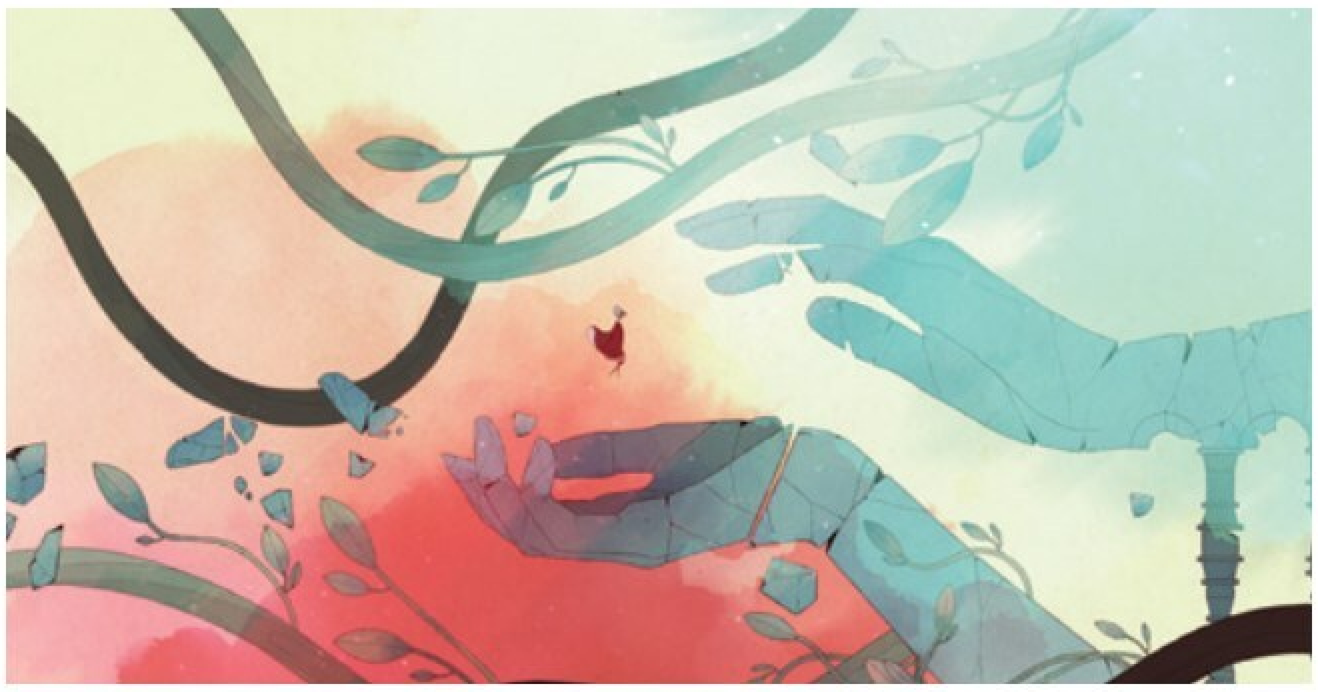
Gris

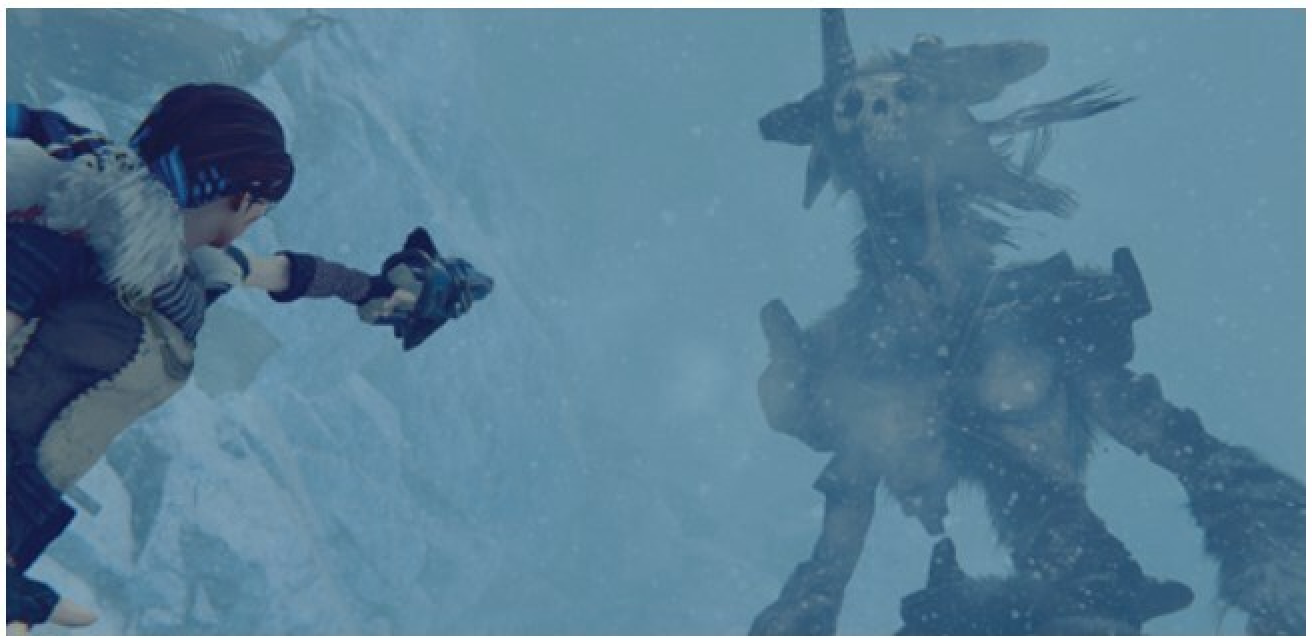
Platform: Switch • PC
Developer: Nomada Studio

Gris tells the abstract story of a woman struggling with sorrow. The world begins with few colors, but new shades appear in the environment as you make your way forward. The world, and the character you control, feature a beautiful hand-drawn style. She moves and leaps through the two-dimensional environment with impressive fluidity and earns new abilities as she progresses.

During my demo, I collect fireflies that create bridges to reach new platforms, unlock the ability to turn my dress into a heavy cube in order to slam toward the ground, use red butterflies to leap to incredible heights, and outrun a giant inky crow that swirls in and out of existence. I couldn't fight it, so I don't expect the final game to feature any traditional enemies. I eventually got away from it.

Gris represents a style of indie game that has become increasingly popular – the artistic, abstract platformer – but it's a genre I am happy to see grow. Unfortunately, Nomada does not have a release date yet.
» **Kyle Hilliard**





Praey For The Gods

Platform: PC
Developer: No Matter Studios

Praey for the Gods opens with a woman waking up in a snowy environment. Why she is there is not immediately apparent, but she makes her way forward, leaving behind footprints in the snow. I discover a magical cylinder that must be pulled out of its casing, rotated, and inserted back into its original position. The first time I encounter this mechanic, it opens a door, but due to their prevalence, it looks like the cylinders will have multiple functions.

Once outside of the tutorial, it's quickly clear what game Praey for the Gods is heavily inspired by: Shadow of the Colossus. I encounter a giant, ancient creature with patches of fur covering its body, which allows me to climb to its shoulders. The creature has a few cylinders on its body and I must make my way to each one to pull it out, rotate it, and re-insert it without falling off. The intense moments of climbing a Colossus are well-emulated here, but the setting and tools like the grappling hook have the potential to give the game a distinct identity of its own. Praey for the Gods does not currently have a release date.
» **Kyle Hilliard**

Spelunky 2

Platform: PS4 • PC
Developer: Mossmouth, Biltworks

The original Spelunky married the simplicity of its controls with layers of complexity alongside its mechanics and design to become an infinitely replayable game. Now Spelunky 2 has the difficult task of following up on that description without reinventing the wheel. Starring Anna Spelunky, the daughter of the first game's protagonist, Spelunky 2 brings the journey to the caverns of the moon where everything is just a little different and slightly more off-putting.

Spelunky 2's biggest change is the addition of liquid physics. Now setting off traps or stepping on the wrong button can bring lava down on your head or take you down a path headed straight for a shopkeeper you'll wish you didn't anger. Add in online co-op, rideable animals, and a host of new items, and the game is hitting just the right amount of new content. Spelunky 2 is still a long ways away from launch with a late 2019 window, but hopefully it can fill the big shoes in front of it. » **Imran Khan**

Due Process

Platform: PC
Developer: Giant Enemy Crab Corps

Indie games often emulate the 8- and 16-bit eras of gaming. While Due Process does look to the past for its visual direction, it's moving forward slightly on the nostalgia timeline for a game that plays like a modern tactical shooter, but has character models and environments reminiscent of Metal Gear Solid. Its 32-bit look gives it its own style, and also eliminates the expectation of realistic shooting. Headshots don't insta-kill your opponents, allowing players to focus on tactics instead of accuracy.

Each match takes places in a procedurally generated level, but both sides – those trying to protect a bomb and those trying to diffuse it – get time to look over the level before the match starts and draw notes on the environment. In our matches, devs from Giant Enemy Crab Corps drew arrows and lines on the ground to help newcomers like me know where to go and what to protect. Because of this mechanic, it did not take long for us to develop good strategies, even without spoken strategizing. Betas are planned for Due Process' future, but its release date has not been locked down. » **Kyle Hilliard**

BloodRoots

Platform: PC
Developer: PaperCult

Claimed by developer PaperCult as a Hotline Miami-like, BloodRoots puts the player in the same visceral kill-or-be-killed gameplay as its inspirations. The top-down action has the Lone Wolf, a warrior draped in wolf hide, fighting his way through various murderous playpens using anything in the environment as a weapon. Grabbing various logs, pieces of fence, pots and pans, and all other manner of weaponry is the only way to get your way to the end of a level.

A single hit means death for either Wolf or his enemies, giving the game a puzzle-like feel in addition to its high-tension and twitchy combat. Players who hesitate will find themselves restarting often, while anyone who rides a hay wagon directly into a wall to smash two enemies and then grabs the wheel of the wagon to dispose of the third will be much more efficient. BloodRoots is currently only scheduled for PC in 2019, but PaperCult has indicated that consoles are being considered, as well. » **Imran Khan**

My Friend Pedro

Platform: Switch • PC
Developer: DeadToast Entertainment

My Friend Pedro feels like the kind of game Deadpool should be in, or the kind of game he would play, or even make. The side-scrolling shooter puts players in control of a gunman who's flipping off walls, pirouetting between bullets, and making trick shots using frying pans and multiple types of guns as he shoots his way through levels at the behest of a flying banana named Pedro.

As a dual-analog shooter, players are tasked with clearing out stages in a similar vein to something like Hotline Miami, taking full advantage of the area around them to best capitalize on the situation. A frying pan can be kicked into the air and shot at to reflect bullets at an enemy perched on an unreachable ledge. A kitchen knife sitting on a table could be simply kicked toward an unsuspecting enemy. Each room gets solved at different speeds depending on how skilled and creative you can be. My Friend Pedro releases on both Switch and PC in early 2019. » **Imran Khan**

Raising The Next Generation Of Pros

What it's like to coach in the world of video games

As part of the professional Fortnite team Gankstars, Cesar Sainz (a.k.a GS Pixul) has made a living by mastering the worldwide phenomenon. However, when he's not building fortresses with amazing speed on Twitch, Pixul is spending a few hours a day passing on pro gaming lessons to eager students.

Name:
Cesar "GS Pixul" Sainz

Occupation:
Fortnite coach

Twitch:
Pixul_Tv

Twitter:
GankPixul

interview by Javy Gwaltney

What does it mean to coach people to play Fortnite? What sort of students does that game attract?
The students are pretty much kids, but I've had adults as well in their 40s reach out to me. They see how big Fortnite is and they all want to get better for their own reasons. Sometimes it's to be the best amongst their friends or they just enjoy winning. Some of them actually want to become professionals. It all depends on whatever the player wants.

What's the average age of people you coach?
It varies. It's all over the place. Sometimes people in their 20s, sometimes older. If you want to get specific, it usually hovers around 12-15.

How did you get started?
I started coaching because I'm part of a professional team called Gankstars, which is affiliated with the gaming tutoring service GamerSensei. When I signed with the team, GamerSensei was like, "Hey we'd like to talk about coaching kids. Would you be interested in that?" I was like "Of course!" I've been doing this for around six months now.

Does coaching Fortnite pay decently?
It does actually! I know people on GamerSensei who actually do sustain themselves off it, but I guess it does depend on where you live at, too. But yeah, there are multiple people I know who coach eight hours a day full-time, like seven days a week. I don't because I have team obligations. I coach about four or five hours a day. But that's just me. I do know people who push themselves and treat it like a full-time job.

So what do you get out of coaching?
I guess it's just seeing how excited these people are to play with me. It's just a really good self-esteem booster to have someone want to play with you and get better. A lot of the time, a week or two weeks after a session, I'll get emails from people being like, "Hey I won this amount of games. I've never done that before. Thank you so much!" All the positive feedback just feels really good. I know what it's like to not be good at something, so it's really awesome feeling at the end of the day knowing that I've helped these players get to where they want to be at.

Why do these players want to be coached?
I think it's a popularity thing. My little brother goes to high school and Fortnite is literally everywhere. It's on mobile. It's on every single console. It's on PC. I think it's become a peer pressure, social status kind of thing where it's like, "Oh hey, I'm better than you" or, "I have this many wins and you don't" sort of thing. I think a lot of these people – kids especially – some of them are pretty decent or not good and they get picked on. I think it ultimately boils down to Fortnite being so around their lives they want to get better at it.

Do you ever interact with parents at all about the lessons? Do you get a sense of what they think?
I've never really interacted with them. Honestly, I'm just another person on the internet and they're like "Oh, we get it." A lot of the times when kids are around 10 or 11, we'll speak a little at the beginning of the lesson, and they'll say "Yeah, my son wants to get better." It just seems like they want their kids to be super happy. Maybe they might not fully understand it but they see that being good at this game makes their kid extremely happy.

If another game becomes as popular as Fortnite and takes over the scene in the future, would you be interested in making the jump coaching for whatever that game is?
Just having the mindset of how players develop skills can translate to other games is a good way to look at it. I could probably transfer to another game. I know what it takes. But for now, the way that GamerSensei functions, you can only be a coach if you're playing that game. Since I'm a pro at Fortnite I coach Fortnite, since that's what I am. I know a lot of coaches who specialize in Counter-Strike. I think that's just the way it works right now, but it might be different for the future.

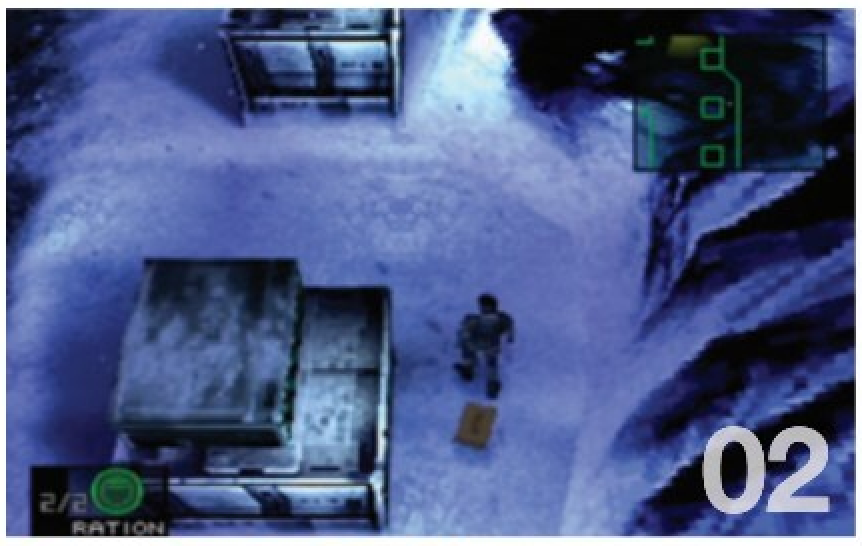
DREAM SEQUENCES

by Jeff Cork

The Whole Shebang

Super Mario Bros. 2

Mario 2 felt a little off upon its release, and there's a reason beyond that whole "Doki Doki Panic" thing: It was all a dream. Any weirdness you may have noticed is the result of it being Mario's subconscious, self-insert fanfic.



Return To Shadow Moses

Metal Gear Solid 4

Hideo Kojima couldn't resist taking players back to Metal Gear Solid's PS1 origins, via a faithful recreation of that classic game. When Solid Snake awakens, his in-game model retains its lo-fi visuals for one memorable instant.

Something's Fishy

The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening

Nintendo returned to the "It was all a dream" well once again, but not how you might have expected. The Game Boy release's surreal nature may have been explained away with dreams, but the dreamer's identity made it weird all over again.

Max's Nightmares

Max Payne

Max is tortured by the deaths of his wife and child, and peace doesn't come with sleep. Navigating drab mazes – with audio accompaniment of your family screaming – wasn't exactly fun, but it remains a memorable element of Remedy's noir classic.

Molly's Dream

What Remains of Edith Finch

Whether the result of an active imagination or accidental poisoning, one thing's certain: Molly Finch's vignette is an early highlight in Giant Sparrow's game. The tyke's transmogrifying tale has her leaping from one animal body to the next, culminating in a waking (?!) nightmare.

Hunter's Dream

Bloodborne

The blurred lines between dreaming and reality is commonplace in Lovecraft-inspired horror, and From Software tapped into that element to great effect. It's perhaps best represented in the game's hub, a fleeting place of refuge in an all-encompassing nightmare.

Dreamy Ending

God of War (2018)

Players who took the time to bring Kratos and Atreus back home at the end of the latest God of War were rewarded with an additional ending scene. Whether or not Atreus' dream was an omen, it provided players with a tantalizing look at what (or who) might come next.

Guy Savage

Metal Gear Solid 3

Naked Snake hit the hay right after talking about Dracula with Para-Medic, which led to a bizarre interactive nightmare on PlayStation 2. Stealth went out the window as players hacked and slashed their way through monsters, in what Kojima later revealed to be a canceled project.

Dream Daddy

Life is Strange: Before the Storm

Chloe's father may have died, but he remains a constant presence in her subconscious life. Their relationship is explored through a series of anxiety-riddled dreams. They're a poignant and occasionally shocking reminder of loss.

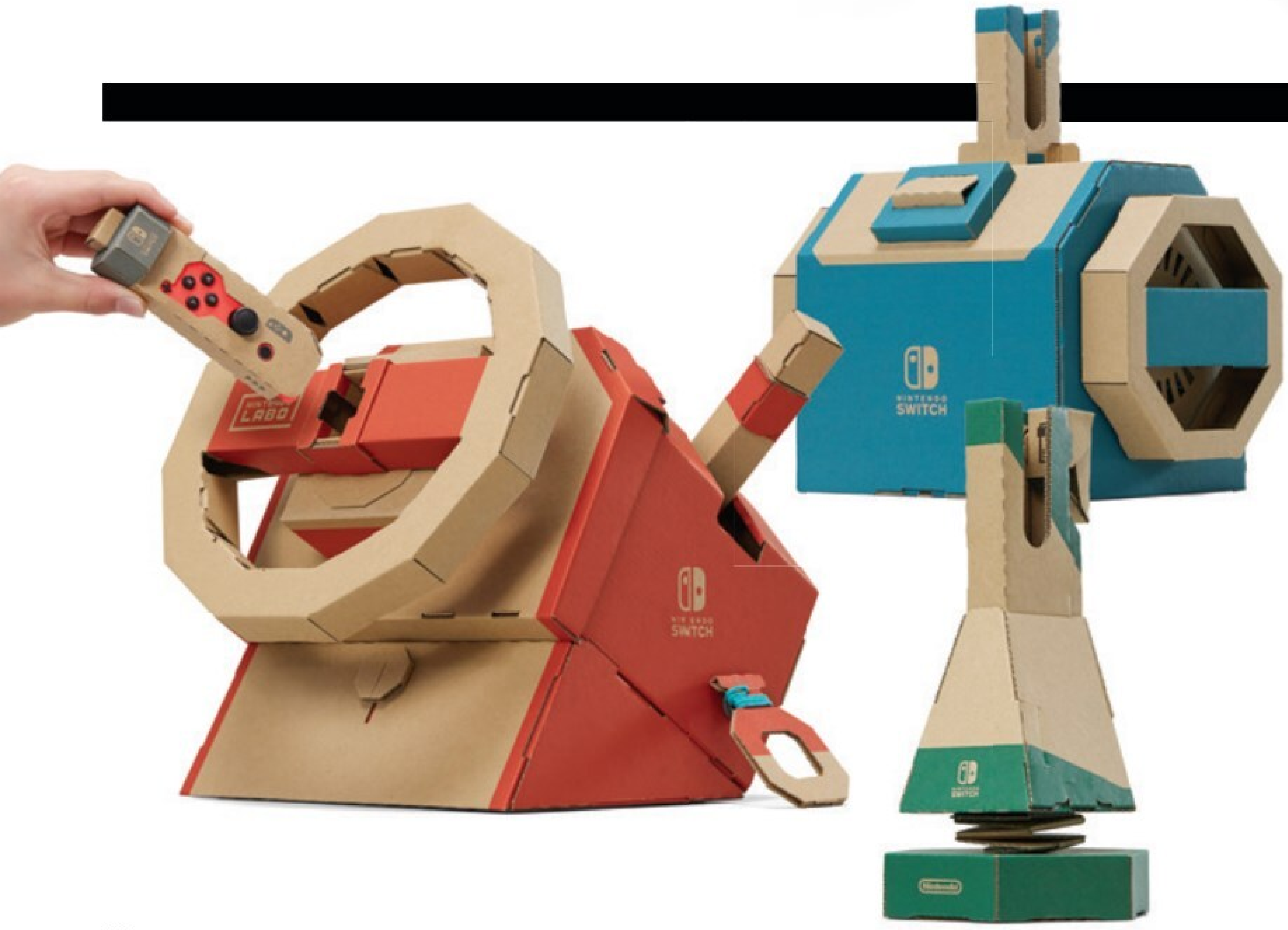
Too Many To Mention

Tomodachi Life

Your characters in Nintendo's oddball life sim were strange enough during the day, but at night, all bets were off. Characters were dipped in candy, had their faces blasted off, and fell from great heights onto giant food. Switch sequel, please?

Labo
Vehicle Kit

by Ben Reeves and Kyle Hilliard



The first two Labo Kits were hit and miss, but Nintendo's third Labo effort leans into the video game aspect of its creative building toolkit and ends up being the strongest set to date. The Vehicle Kit includes everything you need to build a cardboard control deck for a car, a plane, and a submarine, each of which uses a constructible gas pedal. After you build the set, the game lets you loose in a large open world to complete various tasks like collecting wandering cows or popping balloons floating across a series of canyons and plateaus. Switching between each vehicle is quick and involves the physical act of relocating a key between the three control setups. Building remains the highlight of Labo, but the vehicles control well and going after the goals in the open world is a lot of fun.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$69.99 | labo.nintendo.com

1 Turtle Beach Elite Pro 2

Ditch the earbuds and upgrade to a console-friendly headset that pulls you deeper into the online action. The custom-tuned 50mm Nanoclear speakers inside Turtle Beach's Elite Pro 2 headset deliver incredibly balanced virtual surround sound thanks to the help of a Bluetooth-connected, app-controlled mixamp. The Elite Pro 2's removable microphone captures audio so crisp that your online teammates might think you're in the room with them. Not only do Turtle Beach's earcups provide noise dampening and cooling comfort, they are so soft you could sleep on them. Turtle Beach worked closely with esports teams like OpTic Gaming and Splyce to design this new version of the Elite Pro, and the result is a quality piece of hardware that justifies its meaty price point.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$249 | turtlebeach.com

2 Lego Ideas Voltron

Voltron is built on the idea of assembling several small things into something greater. Combining those lions with Lego is a perfect fit in more ways than one. This fan-inspired design lets you to build all five lions from the classic 1980s animated Voltron show/modern DreamWorks series and then recombine them into the biggest posable Lego mech ever released.

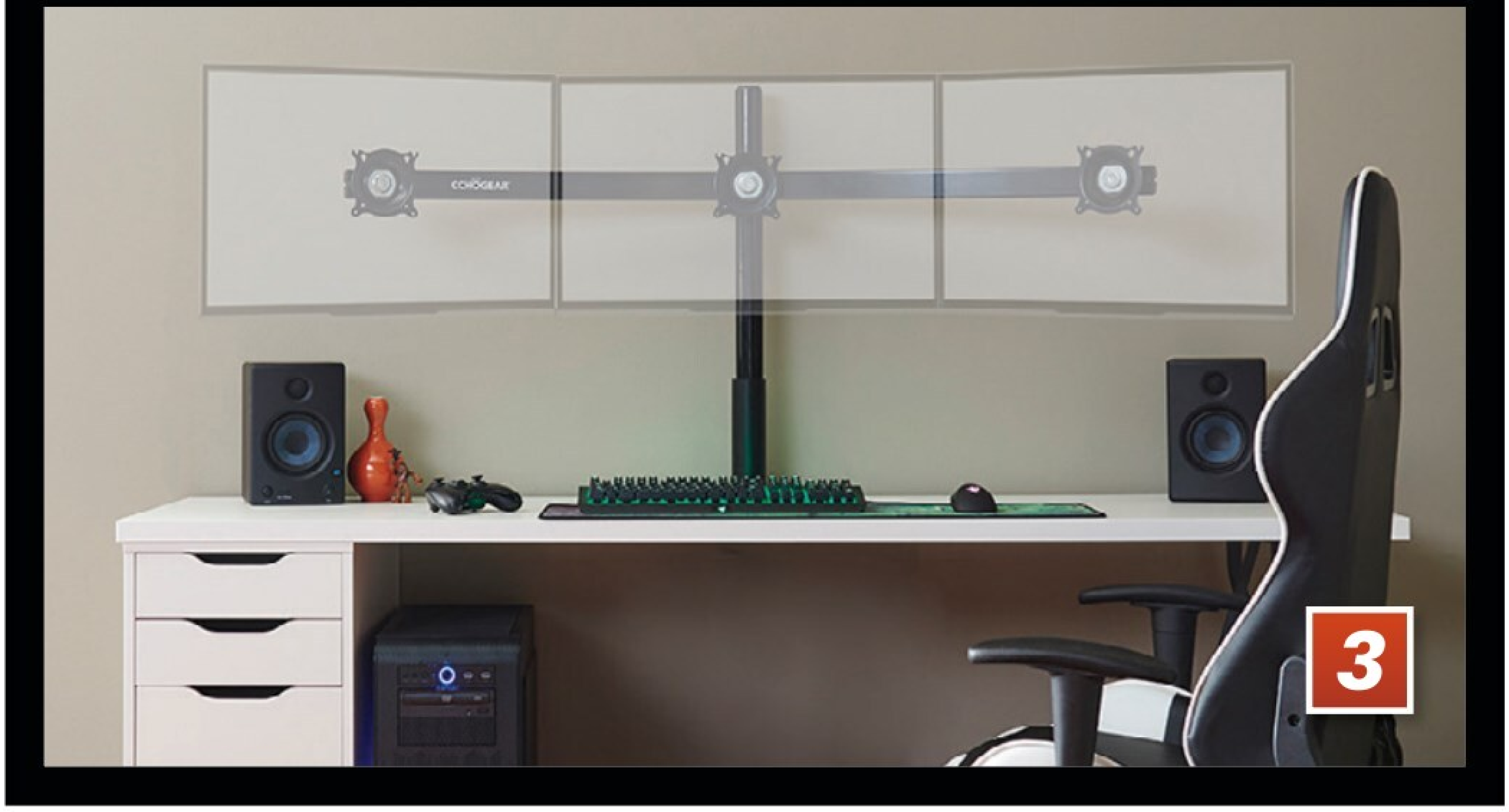
$179 | shop.lego.com

3 Echogear Gaming Monitor Mounts

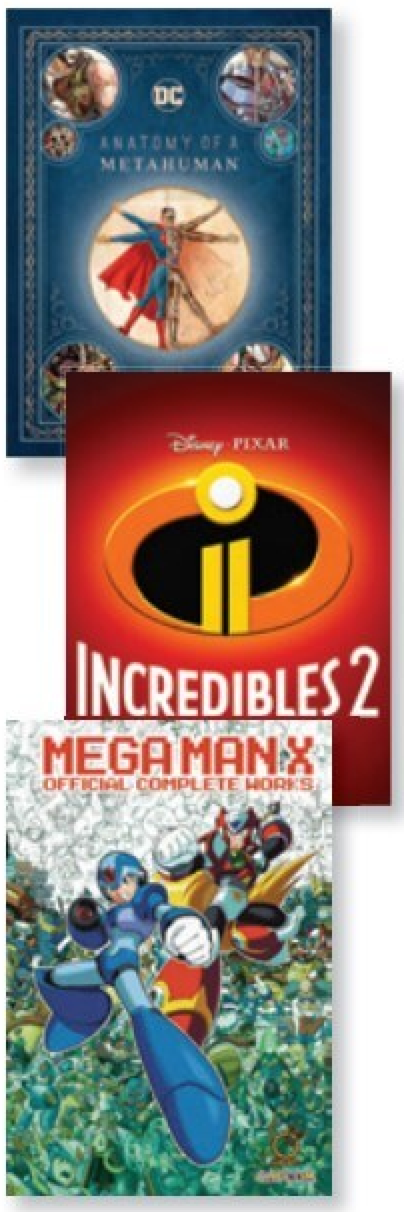
If you experience chronic neck pain after long gaming sessions, you probably didn't throw out your back while gaming – you might just need a better solution for positioning your monitor. Echogear has an assortment of monitor mounts that range from single monitor desk mounts with articulating arms to adjustable triple monitor mounts. Our heavy-duty aluminum mount felt incredibly sturdy and only took about 20 minutes to set up. Not only did we appreciate the extra desk space, we were surprised by how often we took advantage of the adjustable gas spring arms to find a more comfortable viewing angle or reduce monitor glare.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$69.99-$199.99 | echogear.com



Media Shelf



DC COMICS: ANATOMY OF A METAHUMAN

Learn to protect yourself from the scourge of metahumans. This detailed encyclopedia features anatomical cutaways and detailed dossiers for every major super human in the DC universe. The entire book is told from the perspective of Batman, who has contingency plans for even his closest allies.

$50.00
insighteditions.com

INCREDIBLES 2

Even in the midst of the modern comic movie boom, Pixar's *The Incredibles* remains one of the greatest superhero movies of all time. Fortunately, the sequel doesn't disappoint. As Helen is called away on a new super hero adventure, Bob engages in one of the greatest battles of his life: raising kids.

$19.99
movies.disney.com

MEGA MAN X: OFFICIAL COMPLETE WORKS

Learn the inside story behind the Mega Man X games with this prestigious hardcover guide celebrating the series' 25th anniversary. Original character designs and other rarely seen development sketches give a unique peek into the development of the Mega Man X franchise.

$39.99
udonentertainment.com

Gamers Should Be Voting, So Why Aren't We?

by Matt Miller, Senior Previews Editor

When considering the latest game release, many players excitedly discuss the opportunities for interactive engagement in their latest purchase. Did you go renegade or paragon? Did you roll a paladin or mage? Which party members did you take into the final encounter? We're fascinated by the chance to express a choice, and see that decision reflected in the resulting scenario. And yet, if we're to believe demographic data, when it comes to expressing choices at real-life polls in the United States, much of the game-playing public simply doesn't show up.

At this point in the history of the medium, gamers come from every walk of life and every age group. But among adults, the percentage of engaged gamers still skews toward the younger end of the spectrum. In a 2017 Pew Research Center study, 60 percent of Americans between 18 and 29 said they played games regularly (that drops a bit to 53 percent of those between 30 and 49). Compare that with the last midterm voting cycle from 2014; the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement found that only 19.9 percent of people aged 18 to 29 voted in that election. While we don't know the exact overlap between those statistics, the numbers certainly suggest that the same people playing the most games are the people casting the fewest votes.

One of the most common refrains that fuels the decision not to vote is the belief that it won't matter, and a perception that somehow everything remains the same no matter who is in office. Regardless of your political opinions, recent years have made that argument ring hollow, particularly for several issues that many game players profess to value. The net neutrality debate has the potential to directly impact gamers and their hobby. The recent and heartbreaking mass shooting at a Madden tournament in Jacksonville suggests that both the gun control and mental-health conversation has direct relevance for those interested in the burgeoning competitive-game scene. International trade wars could have a direct impact on tech and game companies and the products they release. And it's this same bracket of younger adult gamers who tend to have deep concerns about health care, student-loan borrower protections, and civil rights for LGBTQ individuals, among a host of other concerns.

Candidates voted into office in this November's midterm election will undoubtedly sway the course of all those issues for years to come. The 2016 presidential election was ultimately decided by 80,000 votes in just three states. By way of comparison, Epic Games recently announced that Fortnite had reached 125 million players. Even if a tiny percentage (0.06%) of those players of a single game were U.S. voters in those states, they would have had the potential to decide the presidential election. And in most of the midterm votes for governors, senators, representatives, and other offices in this upcoming midterm, the difference between winner and loser is likely to be far less than 80,000 votes.

Many other individuals don't vote because they've been led to believe they can't. That's a travesty, because they're often wrong. A simple internet browser query for "Can I vote" will instantly bring you to a website run by the National Association of Secretaries of State, with simple drop-down menus for your state offering details on how to register, find polling places, and the valid forms of ID you need for your location, among other details. If you've never stepped into a polling place before, it's far easier than you'd expect. If you can figure out the upgrade system in the latest Bethesda role-playing game, I promise you're more than capable of showing up to decide who will dictate the course of your country, state, and city.

Voting this year is on Tuesday, November 6. No matter your political leanings, you should make your voice heard. For many of us, the opposing team isn't a political party or group – it's an establishment that is counting on you to not show up. As long as we remain silent at the polls, they can afford to overlook our deepest worries and the issues we care the most about. If they were taunting you in a pregame lobby, it would infuriate you. But that's just what they're doing. They're winning because we're not even playing the game. Don't rage quit the match. Prove them wrong.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer

November2018

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 06
- Overkill's The Walking Dead (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Thursday 08
- Ride 3 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Valiant Hearts: The Great War (Switch)

Friday 09
- Tetris Effect (PSVR, PS4)

Tuesday 13
- Hitman 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- SNK 40th Anniversary Collection (Switch)
- Spyro Reignited Trilogy (PS4, Xbox One) ❶

Wednesday 14
- Fallout 76 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Thursday 15
- Underworld Ascendant (PC)

Friday 16
- Pokémon Let's Go Pikachu/ Let's Go Eevee (Switch)

Tuesday 20
- Battlefield V (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Wreckfest (PS4, Xbox One)

Tuesday 27
- Darksiders III (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Wednesday 28
- Artifact (PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 02
- Bohemian Rhapsody (theaters) ❷
- Homecoming (Amazon)
- House of Cards (Netflix)
- The Nutcracker and the Four Realms (theaters)

Sunday 04
- Mickey's 90th Spectacular (ABC)
- Outlander (Starz)

Friday 09
- The Girl in the Spider's Web (theaters)
- The Grinch (theaters)
- Outlaw King (Netflix)

Friday 16
- Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald (theaters)

Friday 23
- Creed II (theaters)
- Ralph Breaks the Internet (theaters)
- Robin Hood (theaters)

Wednesday 28
- Vikings (History)

Friday 30
- Anna and the Apocalypse (theaters)

GAMER CULTURE

Thursday 01
Avengers 700 ❸
A new member will join the Avengers in the series' 700th issue. This story also teases a number of things for the greater Marvel universe, including a secret tied to Wolverine's resurrection, new developments for Namor's Defenders of the Deep, and Russia's Super Solider program.

Saturday 03
League Of Legends World Championships
The best League of Legends teams in the world compete today for the 70-pound Summoner's Cup, and an even heavier cash prize. Last year's champion was Samsung Galaxy that took a large chunk of a nearly $5 million prize pool. This tournament was said to be seen by 60 million unique viewers.

Sunday 18
Dreamhack
If you're in the Atlanta area this weekend, and you just happen to have your PC rig with you, check out Dreamhack, a massive LAN party held in the Georgia World Congress Center. Along with 24-hour gaming, this three-day expo offers live music, cosplay competitions, tournaments, shopping, and more.

Thursday 21
Shazam
The first Shazam ongoing series in almost 20 years is here and helmed by comic legend Geoff Johns. In the first issue Billy Batson is having troubles balancing his school work with his superhero life. This series is a great jumping-on point for people who are excited about next year's Shazam film. ◈

» platform
PS4

» style
1 to 4-Player Compilation
(4-Player Online)

» publisher
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» developer
Media Molecule

» release
2019

CHARTING THE FRONTIERS OF IMAGINATION

With DREAMS, the creators of LittleBigPlanet and Tearaway want to give you the power to build your own amazing universe and let friends and strangers experience its wonders for themselves

by
Javy Gwaltney

HAVE YOU EVER DREAMED OF MAKING A FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER OR RPG?

Maybe a racing game? Many of us have yearned to try our hands at game creation but for various reasons we're never quite able to do more than fantasize. Learning how to develop games is time-consuming and expensive, often requiring years of study, not to mention tracking down collaborators to help create the parts of the project you can't. But what if you could create that amazing game nestled in the back of your mind not in a matter of years, but days? For the past seven years, LittleBigPlanet creator Media Molecule has toiled to design a creative suite both accessible and ridiculously deep, capable of letting users who have never programmed or illustrated in their lives make almost any game in any genre they can imagine – and do it with style.

The ambitions of this team of England-based developers' sounds like an impossible fantasy. You know whats even wilder?

They might just pull it off.

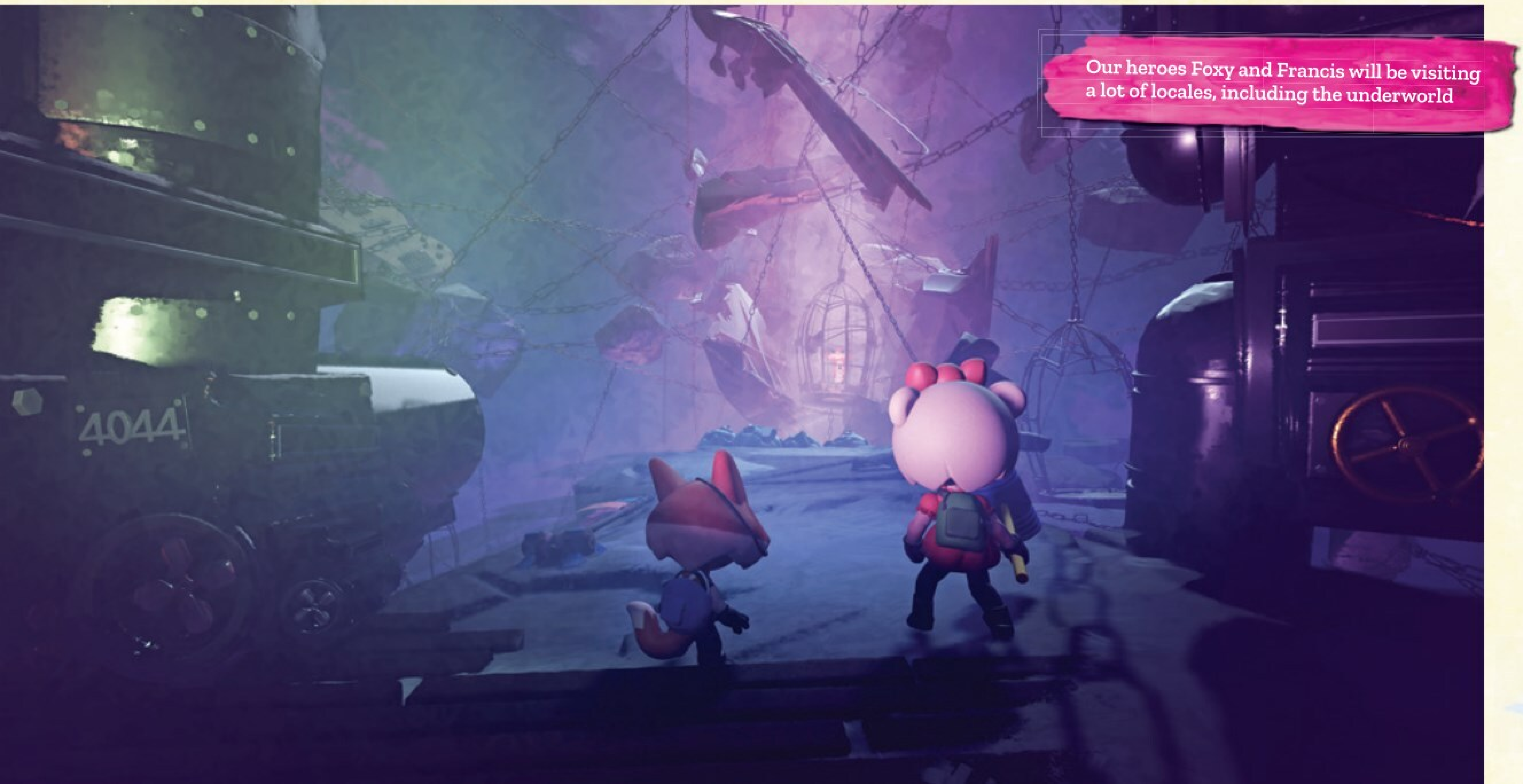
TALK THE TALK

The office of Media Molecule is an unconventional one, eschewing a corporate honeycomb setup for something more freeform and lively. Hardly any cubicles build walls between employees, almost all of whom chat excitedly about what they're contributing to the project as a line of paper lanterns dangle above them. A small pink lobby contains glass cabinets with shiny awards for both LittleBigPlanet and Tearaway. On the floor above is a cafeteria with a balcony built in that casts a grey but nice view of the sleepy town of Guildford, England. It's a place known for being the UK's hub for game developers, housing the likes of Supermassive Games and Fireproof Games, and for its obsession with Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*. There is perhaps no place on earth more fitting for a studio known for putting out polished games that make the world of imagination their stomping ground.

Media Molecule is familiar with handing players a palette, shoving them in front of a blank canvas, and telling them to go wild. The colorful platformer LittleBigPlanet innovated by letting players create and share their own levels with a robust editor, resulting in over 15 million custom levels being made by users. Dreams is billed as the next step up from that, giving players the ability to craft not just levels but objects, animations, games, and even feature-length movies. The studio's recurring statement on Dreams' capability is "the question isn't what can't you do in Dreams, but how can you do it," implying that the creation tools are limited only by imagination and effort.

We're skeptical. As if to challenge our doubts, creative director Mark Healey tells us as he boots up Dreams, "This was all made with the game's tools. No cheating. It's a genuine example."

A woman's voice booms as PlayStation's familiar green triangles and pink circles zoom past on the black screen. "Nothing, nothing at all. And then, something. A hint of an idea. It could be anything. It could be everything." The next half hour goes by in a fantastical blur. We select an imp, Dreams' squiggly, cutesy cursor, and are taken to a level selection screen where we load into the first stage of the story mode. We float down a hallway that looks like it might be outside a private eye's office, complete with a saxophone's howl in the background. Using the DualShock's motion control and the R2 button, we swing open the door and zoom inside a messy apartment filled with records, boxes, and overturned furniture. The small, pathetic room is swallowed in a sharp contrast between bright lights and utter darkness, creating a strong noir vibe.



Our heroes Foxy and Francis will be visiting a lot of locales, including the underworld

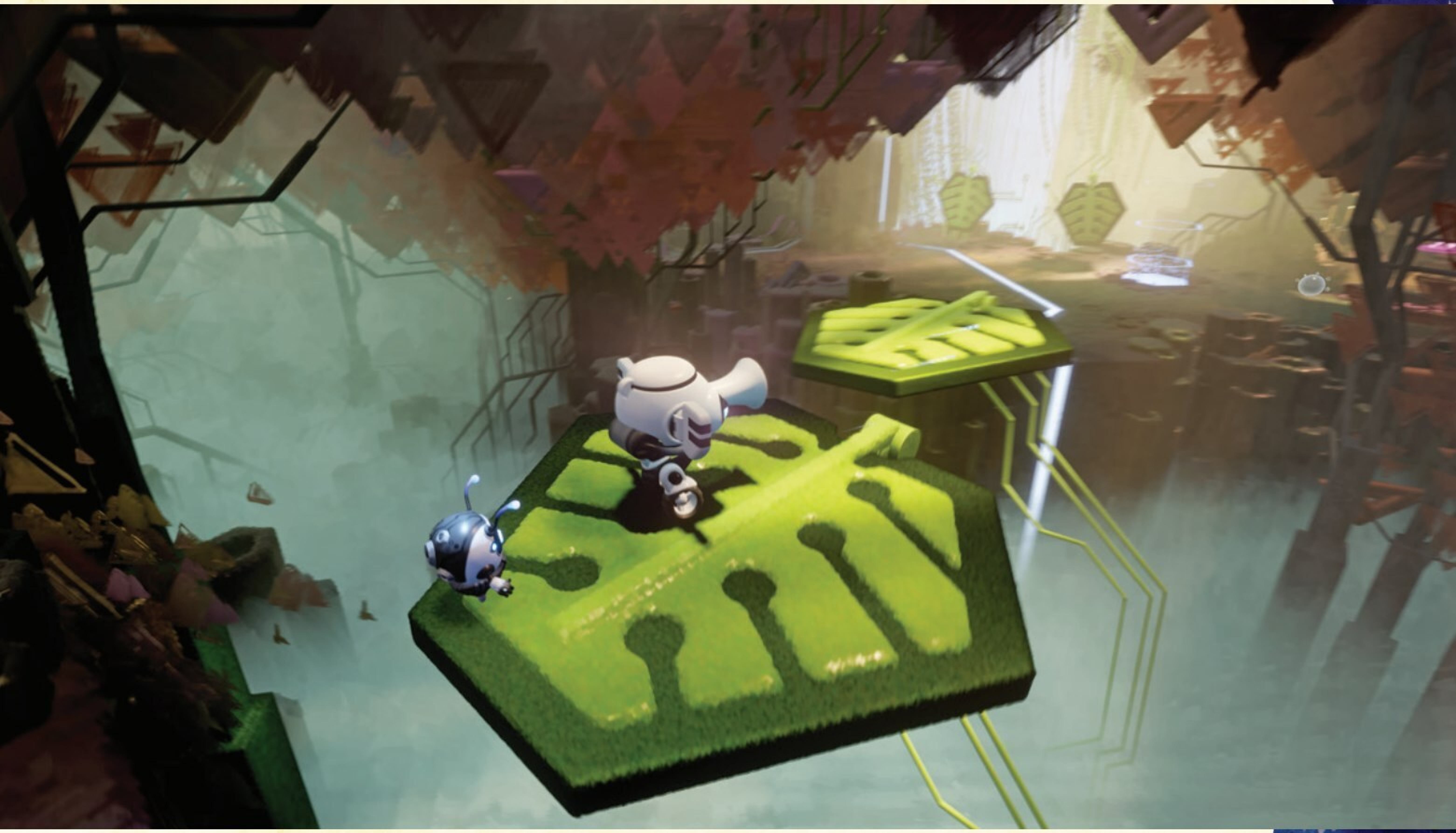
Media Molecule says all of Dreams' story mode was made in the game's creative suite, with tools that players can use to make their own creations

A man's voice cuts through the music. "I used to think I was god's gift." Enter Art, a down-on-his-luck musician and the protagonist of Dreams. The camera zooms around the apartment, giving us tiny puzzles to solve, like pushing some records aside to reveal a photo of Art's former bandmate Laila. Doing so causes the game to progress with more of Art's monologue, with the camera jumping from point to point in the apartment with each progression. "That's the record we would have made," Art moans as shadow figures of him and Laila play out on the wall revealing the argument that split the band apart.

"Me and Laila, we go way back," Art explains as we jump to various toys littered across the floor, including a robot, a plush fox (named Foxy) with an eyepatch, and a bear (Francis). Suddenly a cute pink dragon erupts from a locker box. "Lancewing! She was my inspiration, but I lost her somehow," Art says.

This is where things get really weird. A portal appears and Lancewing takes off into it, with Foxy and Francis in pursuit. A second later, we've seamlessly left Art's apartment and are now in a beautiful grassy forest that has a pastel quality to it. It's as though we've sprung up inside a painting. Moreover, we're in control of Francis, and the game has gone from being a guided puzzle adventure to a platformer. The two animals (with Foxy controlled by the A.I. in lieu of another player) chase after Lancewing, bopping obstacles out of the way with Francis' wooden hammer and avoiding traps while a whimsical, harmonica-heavy tune plays in the background and Art's narration pops in from time to time to comment on events.

Protagonist Art has a lot of issues to sort through during his journey through the dreamspace

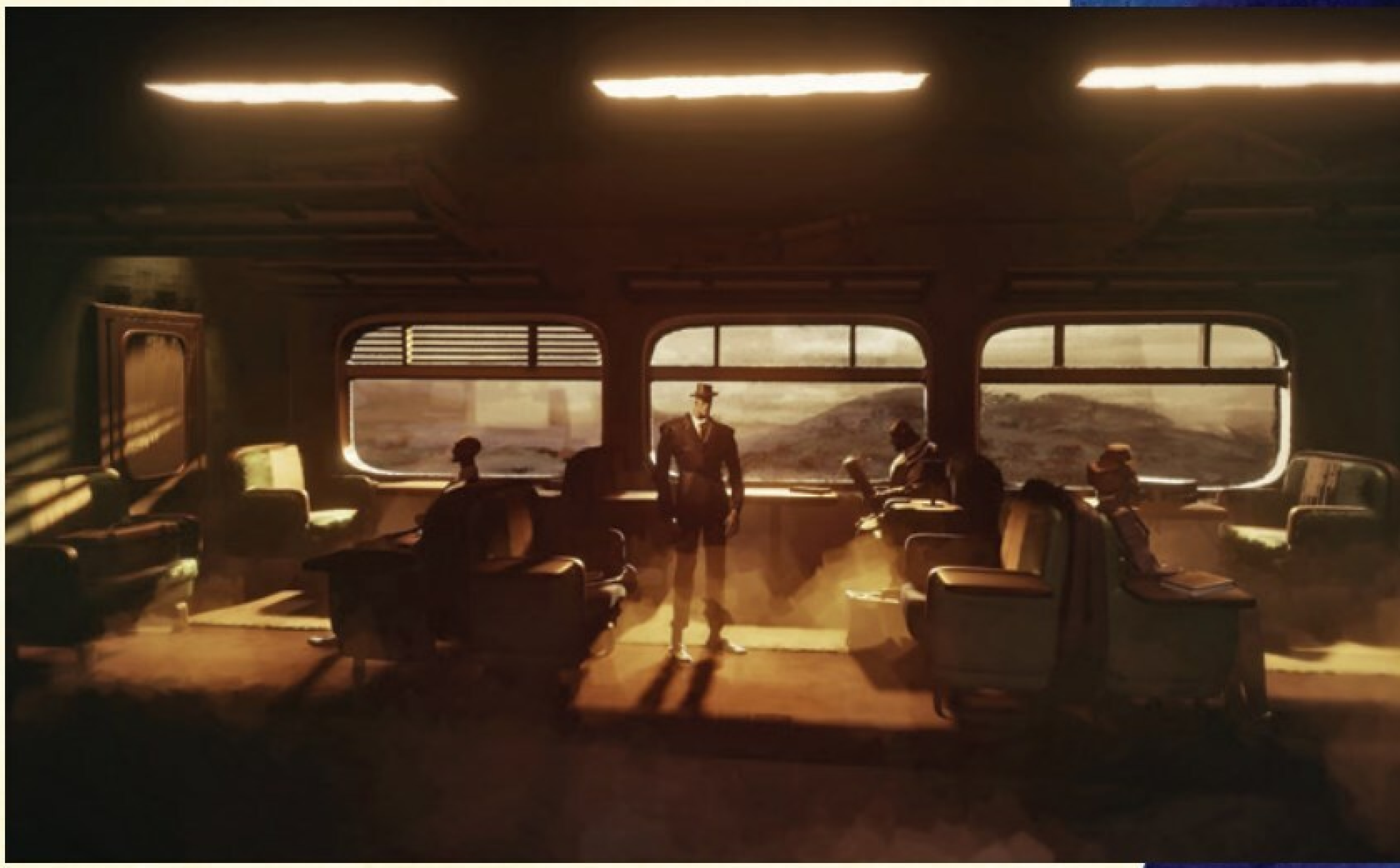


At points during this pretty excursion, we jump out of Foxy's body with the press of a button and use the imp cursor to manipulate items in the environments, like moving marbles in a weighted bowl to lower a gate. Eventually we reach the end of the level, disappearing down a hole that leads to a room where Art is trapped inside a double-bass coffin. The gameplay returns to a physics manipulation puzzler, with us having to clear several black anvils off the coffin to release Art.

Media Molecule tells us genre-hopping happens a fair amount in Dreams' story mode, which will likely be shorter than LittleBigPlanet, with all the dreams tying into one another to tell Art's story of creative redemption. The effect of transitioning from puzzler to platforming back to another puzzler is well done, and the studio says it has more genres littered across the story, including racing.

Media Molecule jumps us ahead in the story. This time, Art is in a celestial train station with a conductor who won't let him on a train without a ticket, which he informs Art of with an Oompa Loompa-style song and dance. Exploring the station, we find several pieces of luggage containing Art's belongings, including a camera and a banjo string. More exploration reveals a weary traveler accompanied by her dog and a broken banjo. Talking with her brings up multiple point-and-click adventure-like dialogue interactions. We give her the string and she repairs her banjo, playing a song that distracts the conductor long enough for Art to sneak aboard the train and ride away into the night.

The last section of the demo features the little robot from earlier, D-Bug, as he navigates a futuristic complex swallowed up in ruin and decay, with branches covering everything. D-Bug's power is to shoot electricity from his body in every direction, which proves to be useful in powering up platforms for him to traverse. "There are optional paths to explore," Healey says, revealing that these often yield rewards like objects that can be used in the creation suite, but we don't go after any of them in the demo. After roaming around for a while, we find a giant robot. Interacting with him causes his mechanical heart to fall out and shatter. Now D-Bug has to find a way to fix it (also teasing that yes, we do get to control the big robot somewhere down the line). We don't get to start that search; the demo ends here with a fade to black.



Back in the real, non-dreamy world, we turn to the developers in the room. The demo's surreal atmosphere was engaging and we want to see where the story mode goes, but it's clearly designed as a showcase for the flexibility of the tools. If it's an accurate one that can be manipulated by hobbyists, then the creative suite is something to be marveled. The demo's camera control was tight, the audio mix sounded professional, the transitions were smooth, and there were a large variety of animations. No more beating around the bush.

We ask Healey and Siobhan Reddy, the studio director, if players could feasibly make something of this quality in Dream's creative suite. The pair nod.

We remain unconvinced, but the disbelief doesn't last long.

Meet The Dreamers

Though much of Dreams' appeal is rooted in its creation tools and the potential for players to make the games they've always dreamed of, Media Molecule's story mode looks to be a promising journey through a strange and emotionally heavy space. We talked with narrative designer Cara Ellison to get a better grasp on this wild, surreal story. Here are the key players of the tale and what you can expect from them.

Art

The protagonist, a musician with a haunted past, and the man whose shifting mind serves as home to the story itself. Art's story is intended to be redemptive. "The story is essentially about him finding his way back to being able to collaborate and play music with other people again and enrich his life by starting to play music again."

Francis And Foxy

Art and Laila's toys from childhood, as well as Art and Laila's alter egos in some of the sequences in Dreams, the plush animals are more than the cutesy animals they appear to be. "Francis tends to be a little bit more wild and more interested in thrashing stuff up and I think Foxy is a bit more wily and wants to stand back and essentially search the situation out a bit before he does anything."

Lancewing

A dragon Art is constantly pursuing, Lancewing is intended to represent the collaborative process that Art wants to get back to. "Lancewing is this symbol for people being able to create, which is ultimately represented by the idea of putting the band back together."

Laila

Art's childhood friend and former bandmate. A split between the two flung each in opposite directions, with Art's musical ability fading while Laila's star shines on. However, that doesn't stop her from missing their time together. "What she really misses is the collaboration part of their relationship so she does miss his company and creating, but she's also just as stubborn as Art."

D-Bug

Another favorite toy of Art from his childhood, Healey and Ellison describe the robot as a sort of "chi gun" for Art. "D-Bug is also a toy that Art used to have, but D-Bug's job in our story is to ward off a lot of these bad feelings and lack of energy that Art has felt in the past and reawaken a lot of his feelings in life, especially about how he felt about inventing stuff as a child."

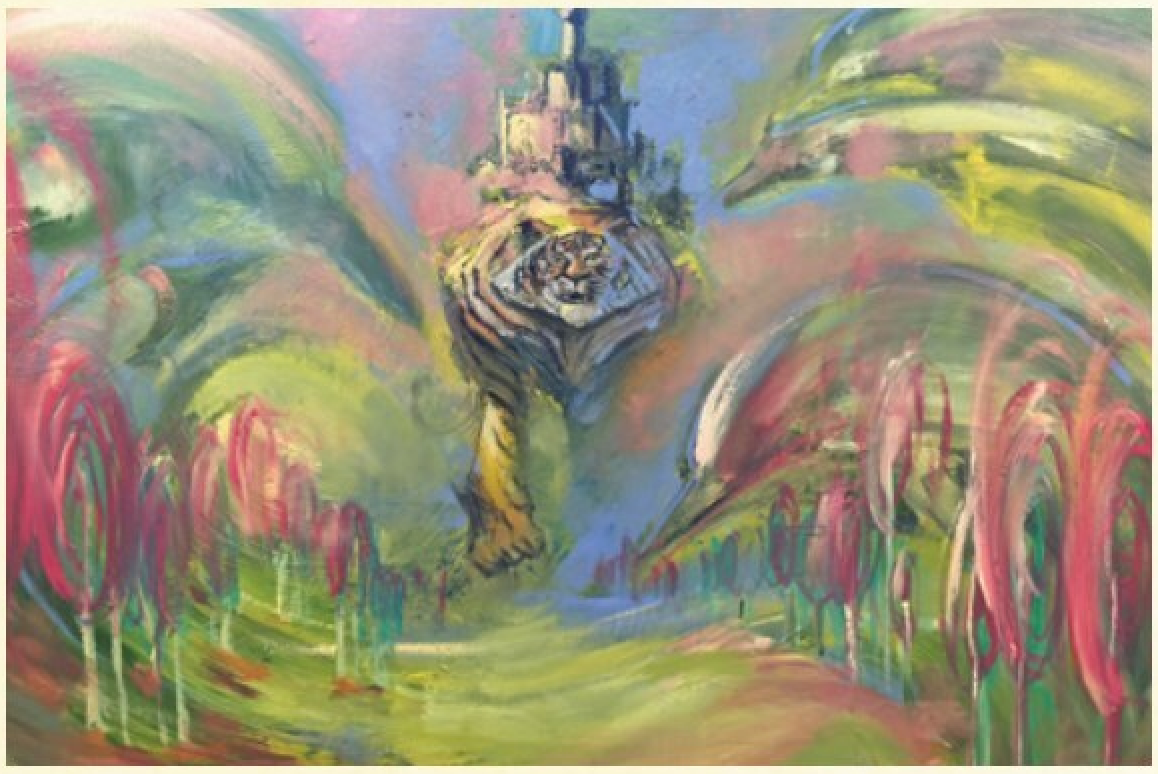
WALK THE WALK

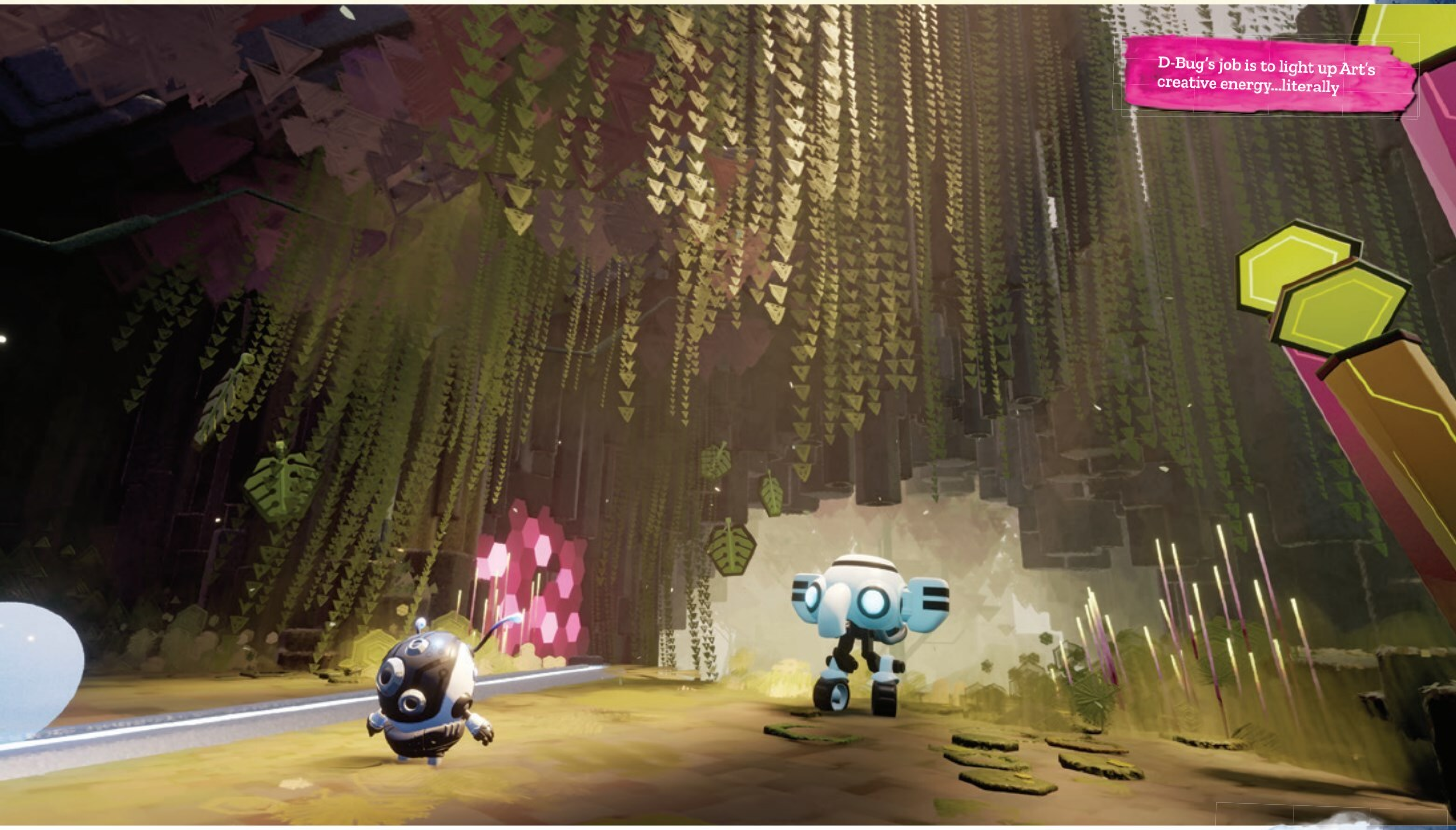
The toolset, called Dream Shaping, is the heart and soul of Dreams. Pitched as accessible to everyone and endlessly deep for experienced creators, the editor makes a quiet first impression with a simple flat square, a skybox above, and a green toolbar at the top of the screen. However, clicking on any of the buttons of that toolbar immediately opens up a plethora of options for whatever function you've chosen. You can spawn objects in the world – called sculpts – with the press of a button. Media Molecule starts us with a biped puppet that looks like an uncolored tabletop model of a human being, faceless and gray.

"So what do we want to make?" asks level designer Jon Beech. We decide on a pirate. Beech brings our peg-legged protagonist to life quickly, sculpting eye sockets into the model, crafting a scraggly beard, sticking a sword in his hand, and even demonstrating how easy it is to customize the puppet's animations and behaviors. The tweaking submenu, usable with any sculpt in the world, endows a model with qualities like health and attack sounds. Instilling animations for puppets is also simple, with several ways of accomplishing it. Beech moves the pirate back and forth wildly with the analog stick and captures the movement with the recorder app, saving that animation and tying it to a button press in the submenu. Presto: our attack animation is born. Within 15 minutes, we've brought a fully-formed character to life.

Designing the level around our pirate friend is also astonishingly easy. Art director Kareem Ettouney takes over the controls but eschews the DualShock for two PlayStation Move controllers, which most of the demonstration staff seems to prefer. He quickly creates a convincing mountainside by spawning some premade rocks and then cloning them with the press of a button. Using a glue tool he sticks them together so that they form boulders. With a little more cloning and placement, he's soon created a mountain that looks convincingly natural. It takes even less time for him to make a beach by planting an oval shape in the world and expanding it beneath our pirate. After filling it in with a sand color, he also adds water at the edge of the map and even makes it look realistic by using the blend tool to give it flowing texture.

From here, the demo only gets more impressive. Ettouney crafts a huge pirate skull out of a sphere in minutes and glues





D-Bug's job is to light up Art's creative energy...literally

EMA
HOTEL
DIRK ROCKLER EVA DETRIECH
"IT CAME FROM HELL"
ACK OF THE 40FT. ROBOT

it to the mountainside. He hollows out the back of the skull and creates a dance room within, placing floor tiles and lights around it. After that, we return outside where Beech takes the controls again to show us something special. The toolbar includes an entire section of function-based objects you can stick in the world called gadgets. Beech plants one called a trigger sensor that's represented as a green glowing field. He sets the trigger for the player and then creates a camera icon, planting it near the skull as an icon viewable in the editor. Clicking on the camera icon, we're taken into the view of the camera itself, which Beech moves around the level with ease until we're looking at the skull from a lower angle, making it seem ominous.

He takes us out of Edit mode and into Play mode, with the transition between the two being instantaneous. This transitioning is particularly impressive because you can switch between the two modes on the fly, making quick edits and then starting Play mode to see how they pan out in-game, adjusting when necessary. We zoom to our pirate hero on the shore, with the camera taking on a third-person platforming view. When he moves into the trigger zone Beech planted, the camera swings into the position he created earlier. The only difference is this time the pirate is moving through the space and Beech has full control over him while the camera remains, creating a cool cinematic view. The camera returns to the pirate after he leaves the trigger zone. Within two hours, we've created a character with attack animations, the environment he moves through, and even filled the world with some of the neat camera tricks you'd see in the likes of Uncharted 4 or Gears of War. The swiftness of the process, and how easy it is to understand and duplicate, is impressive.

Reddy calls Dreams "visual programming." After our pirate demo, I'm convinced the term is appropriate. Playing with Dreams' toolset isn't cheating or bypassing any of the design hurdles of making games. You're still learning programming. The trigger switch is just another version of conditional statements in programming languages. The huge difference here is you're navigating the world of layouts, sliders, and buttons instead of strings and statements. It's *No Fear Shakespeare* but for people who prefer fiddling with user interfaces and snappy toolsets to coding. In a wise move, tutorials are also included, but they're atypical in that they're videos that can be minimized and played as a small square in the corner of the screen while you're actually playing the game, so you can follow their instructions to the letter and strengthen muscle memory.

The toolset's plentiful creative suite options are impressive, but how do you get people to use it, particularly those skittish about creating or learning systems? Media Molecule has an answer: you turn it into a video game.

Lighting, animations, character models, even sound effects and music are all things users can create in Dreams

Create Your Own Symphony

One of Dreams' most fascinating components is its sound creation tool. While the game comes with a load of prebaked music tracks and sounds, you can also record your own dialogue or music with a USB mic or PlayStation Camera and import the sound into the game for you to use how you see fit. Want to record your cat purring as dialogue for one of your characters? Go for it. And if you don't record music yourself, you can also take the premade sets, which range from jazz to electronic to rock & roll, and chop them up and mix them together.

The controls are tight, with you dragging tunes onto a composition sheet that forms a track. During our demo, we mixed drums, an electronic sound, and some recorded audio of everyone in the showing room shouting "Game Informer!" After that, we used the music maker's plentiful tweak menus to slow down and distort the audio of our voices to a crawl to create a creepy, amusing chorus chant that played while the electronica thumped in the background. Connecting the track to the level we created and getting it to play when and where we wanted was simple as well.

There are so many options in the music menu it could make an audiophile's head spin. From distortion to changing pitch, tempo, and even tooling with the tuning of the creator's emulated instruments themselves to produce a different sound makes Dreams a formidable digital audio workstation, rivaling applications like GarageBand and Nuendo. "Someone can make a genuine album in this," creative director Mark Healey asserts.

After seeing all the options within options *within options* in the music creator, it's hard to disagree.

PLATFORM Nº 4
4
044

Dreams' story hops genres frequently. Sometimes you'll be bopping away action-platformer style in a forest, other times solving puzzles in a celestial train station

LIVING INSIDE A DREAM

In spite of so much of its appeal being rooted in an engine for making games, Media Molecule is adamant Dreams is a capital-v video game, and the team is making a progression system to prove it. "Dreams is an amazing world," says Emily Newton Dunn, systems designer. "If you were just thrown in there with nothing to help or guide you it'd be an overwhelming experience." The developer is looking to the likes of Twitter and YouTube to answer two questions: How do you make creation fun for everyone, and how do you get people to share their work?

An in-depth progression system has players accomplishing tasks called Imp Quests in order to gain XP and unlock items to use in Dream Shaping. You level up in Dreams, but it's mostly a prestige thing, with few rewards existing outside of bragging rights for having a bigger number than everyone else. The material gains come from doing Imp Quests. For example, an early pottery quest has you sculpting a certain number of objects. Once you've done that, you gain the XP and you earn a reward, like a new sound file or sculpt. However, don't be too concerned about gatekeeping. There are already a load of objects for you to use from the get-go, and finishing Imp Quests is easy, as many of

them complete while you're fiddling about in the creator. There are countless quests, each of them tied to the many different ways players can interact with the suite. A sculptor builds that category by sculpting objects, while a curator builds that reputation meter by being a good community member. "We're going to be relying on the community to surface the really good stuff," Reddy says. "The maps and content. We want to encourage the idea of people becoming known for having good taste."

Media Molecule is leaning hard into its potential community, building out a social universe where people can follow and reach out to each other to create content together. "We're not all polymaths," Dunn says. "We can't all be amazing at everything. I think that part of making games, making fun, making anything creative is about collaborating with people you gel with." The categorization setup allows artists to seek out people with experience in audio or level design with ease, making your next development team for a project just a couple of keyword searches away.

The social element isn't just about creating together, however. Like with LittleBigPlanet, sharing and playing content others have created is a huge part of the game and a way to bring in users who would rather participate in Dreams' offerings as a player instead of a creator. Dream Surfing is Dreams' portal to that, letting players share what they create – objects, levels, games, movies – on a YouTube-like system filled with playlists. Here, you can follow creators, leave reviews of content, or spend hours playing surrealist games thanks to a handy tag system that lets you mark games with labels and genres. Healey says much effort has been put into streamlining the seamlessness of experiencing shared content and hopes that it results in what he calls dream binging. "You go to Netflix and it's pretty easy to go down a wormhole," he says. "Click on a thing, get recommended for what to watch next. You don't have to be a creator to enjoy YouTube and that's what we want for Dreams."

Media Molecule says multiplayer support for playing with each other in player's creations is on the way, but won't be available at launch. You won't be able to edit an environment at the same time online (you can locally), but that functionality is planned for post-release at some point. There's no way for anyone to craft an MMO, which is the only genre the company says is not capable of being created within the current version of the editor. Still, the idea of bounding around with a handful of other players in a game that you've all built together is an alluring premise and one that hopefully pans out.

Art's journey isn't without its perils

To help make its robotic designs stand out, Media Molecule based looked to real-world animals for inspiration

One Wild Showcase

During our studio visit, Media Molecule showed us a number of small, fun games that had been made in a matter of days (sometimes hours) from developers in their free time that encompass a lot of genres. Here were some of our favorites.

What Are You Afraid Of?

A first-person horror game similar to P.T. featuring a protagonist exploring a house that appears to be haunted, complete with mysterious portals, a spooky vibe, and a strong synth soundtrack.

Ferovium

A side-scrolling shoot 'em up with a combat spaceship zipping across a station, shooting turrets into oblivion.

Hammer Time!

A local multiplayer game that has up to four players competing against one another in Mario Party-esque minigames. One game had hammers competing to hit as many nails down as possible. Another had the hammers suspended on a platform made of puzzle pieces, with each blow from the hammer sending out a shockwave that takes out all the pieces of the floor in the wave's path—the first hammer to fall into the abyss loses.

Moon Raider

A sci-fi flight simulation game like Wing Commander and TIE Fighter focused on dogfighting in an asteroid field, with the player capable of playing from third-person or from a view inside the cockpit.

Helmet Kid

A platformer with a small child wearing a helmet as he navigates a world filled with pits of spikes to leap over and foes to fight.

Let's Get Ready To Thumble!

A goofy local multiplayer game that's Thumb War but with massive hands on a wrestling arena.

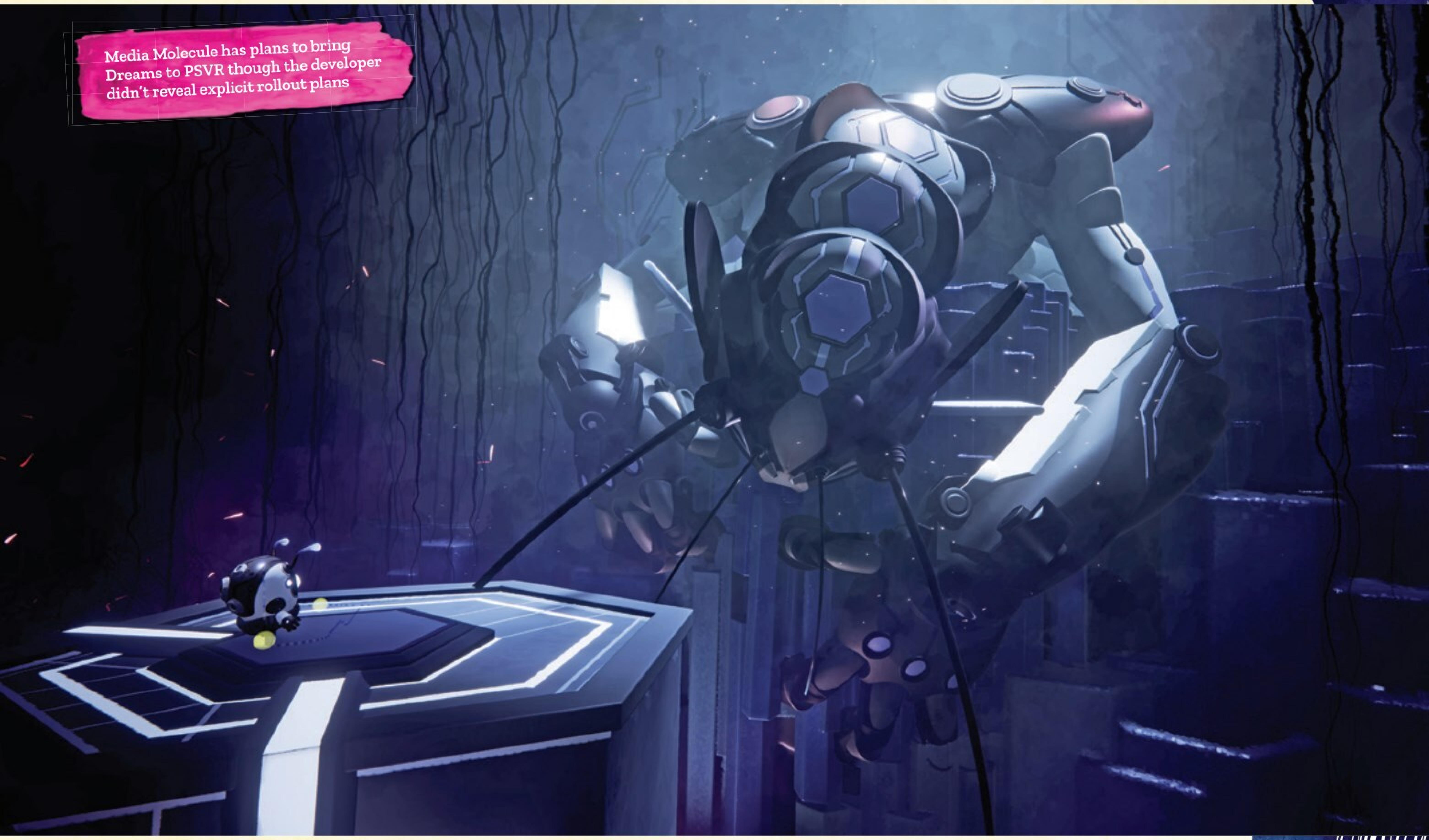
Untitled Mecha Demo

A demo that takes place outside a huge post-apocalyptic dam and has players piloting a combat-outfitted mecha to defend themselves against drones. Gritty visuals and a strong demonstration of first-person shooter mechanics in Dreams (including detailed reloading and solid gunplay) made this one of the most eye-catching projects.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

LittleBigPlanet has understandably served as the foundation for Dreams' creative elements as well as the possibilities of its future, with the studio founders expressing hope that its flagship series' success is an indicator that Dreams has a sizable audience out there. "When we launched LittleBigPlanet, we made a bunch of tools and put it on a PlayStation," Ettouny says. "Who was that for?" he recalls, thinking that people were buying consoles just to disconnect from reality, that they weren't interested in learning necessarily. "We tried our best to make it as gamey and chill as possible. We didn't know who we were going to reach. And to our surprise, 15 million levels were made in LittleBigPlanet. Who were these people? The game audience is filled with cool, creative people. They play and by playing, they're learning 3D spaces, visual language, HUDs. They're building a repertoire."

When asked how he thinks the game's potential community will react to Dreams, Healey chuckles. "God knows. Hopefully positively. There are a lot of things in there that are a progression from LittleBigPlanet, so I'm hoping at least that community comes to this and hits the ground running."



Media Molecule has plans to bring Dreams to PSVR though the developer didn't reveal explicit rollout plans

The world is a different place now than in 2008, when LittleBigPlanet launched with the motto "Create, Play, Share." Now everyone is creating and sharing, as a huge number of big-budget games launch with photography modes or have elements designed to encourage players to create their own emergent stories. Encouraging creativity in abstract ways has become an essential part of popular game design. Whether or not Dreams can tap into the zeitgeist LittleBigPlanet helped create remains to be seen.

Still, Dreams has more than legacy on its side. The marriage of an accessible creation toolset to a networking hub capable of uniting creators as well as consumers means Media Molecule's long-awaited project could be an incredible opportunity to bring creative tools to an audience that hasn't had the means to use them before. "It's easier now to get into the games industry with universities and such," Healey says. "But not everyone has the opportunity to go to university for whatever reasons, so I just really like that someone who's managed to get their hands on a PlayStation 4 and a copy of Dreams has the potential make the next massive triple-A game or really exciting film."

Media Molecule hopes to launch a beta before the end of the year. After it releases, Media Molecule will get its first idea of what people can do with it out in the wild, where creations are no longer solely the fruit of an internal development team experienced with the tools and in touch with the company's creative ethos. Numerous questions remain unanswered or untested about how the developer plans to handle copyright violations and who owns the creations that players make in Dreams. If someone remakes Smash Bros. in Dreams or recreates some other popular game, Media Molecule says that copyright violations (as well as graphic content) will result in the games being removed from Dream Surfing. But what's to stop those creators from filming gameplay and sticking it on YouTube? Will content takedowns be enough to appease copyright holders? As far as who owns the content made in Dreams, Reddy and Healey have little to say in terms of explicit details but have expressed interest in making certain games made in Dreams available in the PlayStation Store sometime after release.

Dreams has a lot to prove, with the true showcase of its potential likely not to appear until after skilled and imaginative users have had enough time to learn the tools, come together, and make feature-length games and videos. That could be a matter of weeks or months. But with so much of how the gaming community interacts ingrained in internet word of mouth, with tales and tutorials that spread like wildfire through subreddits, YouTube, and on social media, this ambitious, hard-to-pin-down project could emerge as one of this generation's most memorable and rewarding titles under the right circumstances.

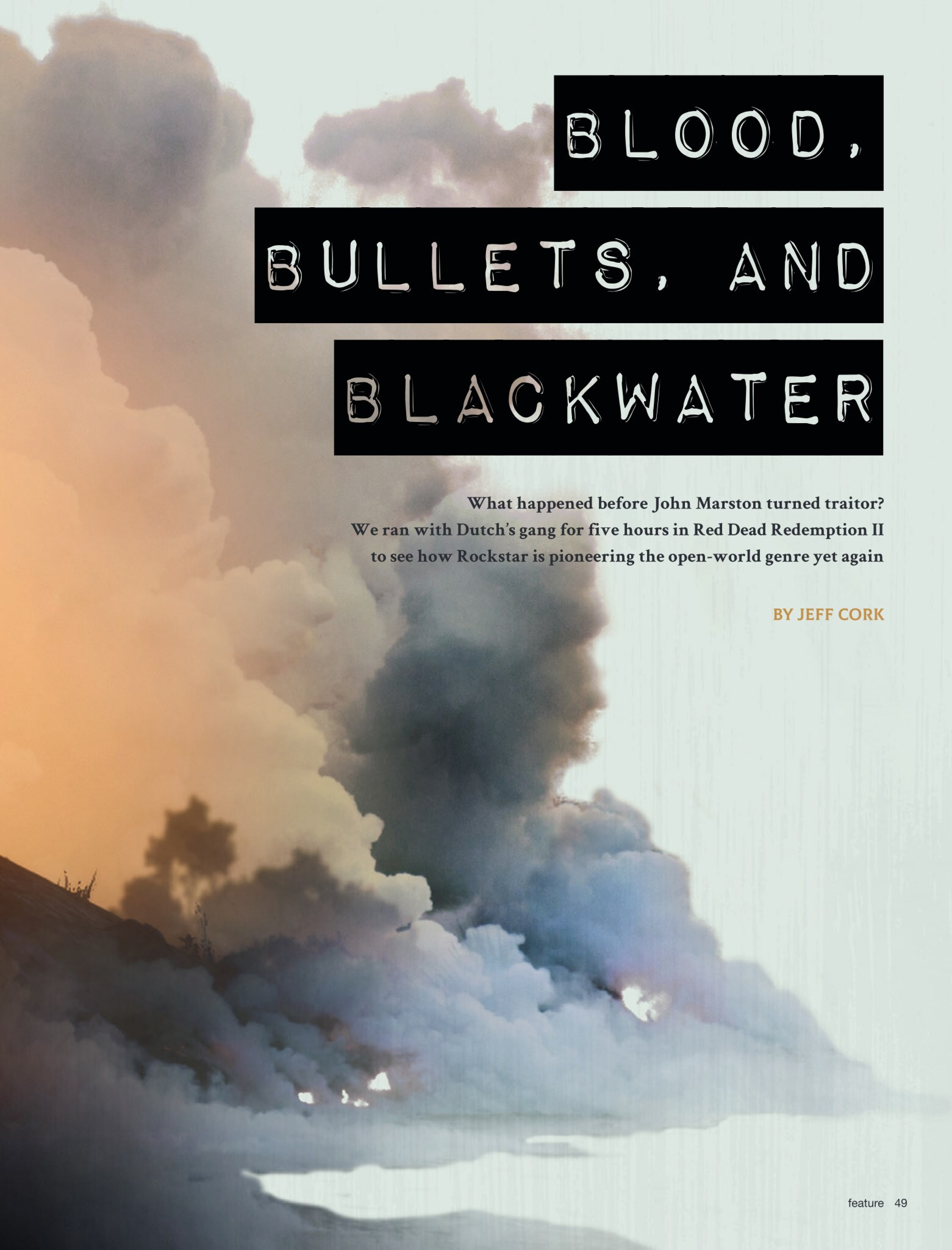
Despite how the company is charging into the unknown once more, Media Molecule is in good spirts and not as worried about finding popular success as much as it is creating something unique and memorable, focused on helping people find joy in creation. "At the end of the day, we're making something we want to make," Healey states. "All we can do is just hope that people are into that kind of stuff too."

After fiddling around inside Dreams for two days and getting a good look at all the possibilities that its easy-to-use interface and wealth of creative materials has, we'd like to think there's an audience out there for it, too. We're curious just how much emotional depth and variety is in the game's story mode, but we enjoyed what we saw of it and look forward to finding out more about Art's journey. More pressingly: despite our initial skepticism, we came away from our time with Media Molecule's latest as believers in its potential to open the doors in the imagination of its players and put tools in their hands that will let them produce and share some truly astonishing worlds.

We cannot wait to see them.

For more on Dreams, visit our hub at gameinformer.com/dreams. You'll find information on the game's story mode, Dream Shaping, exclusive interviews, and more

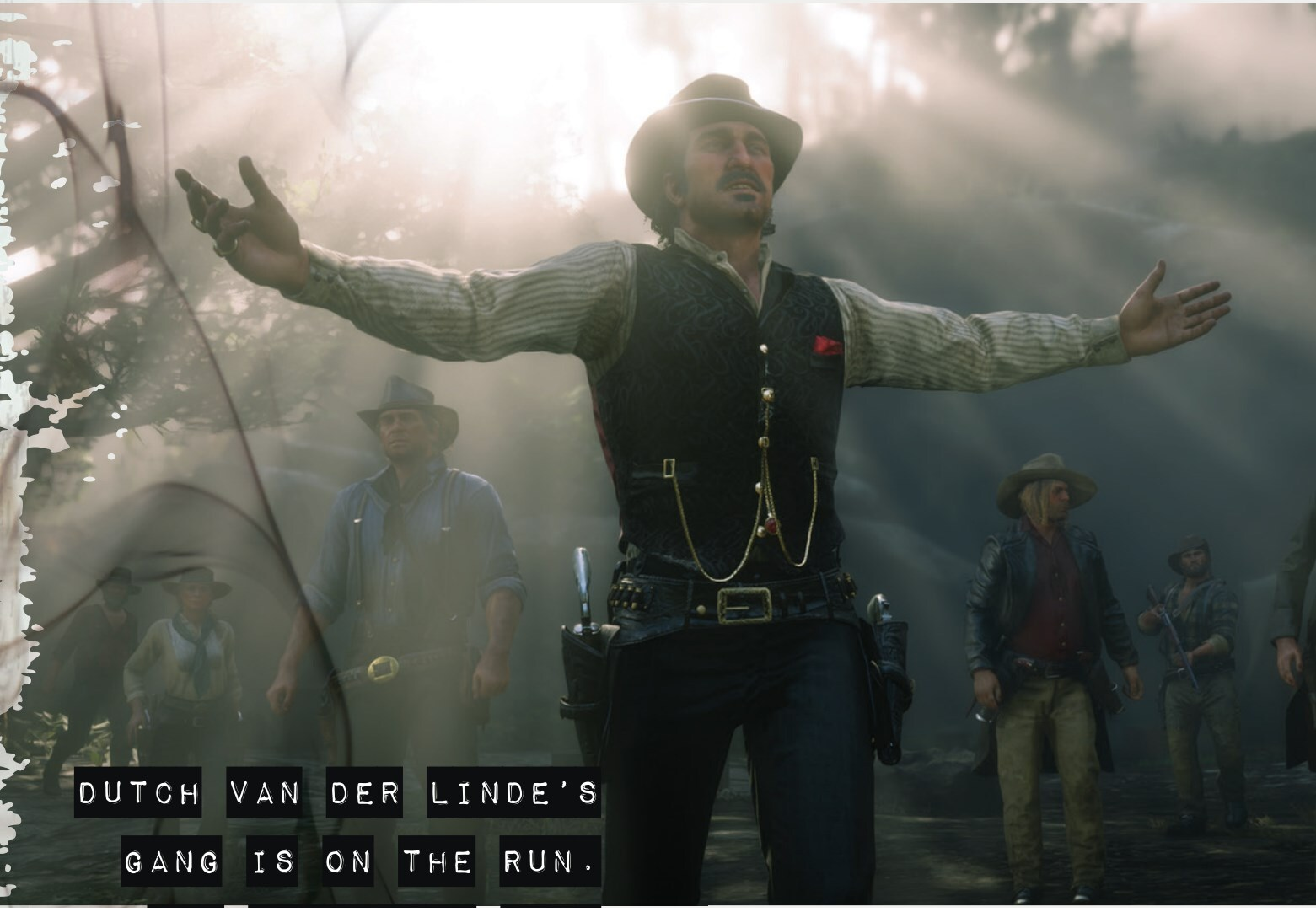
» PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One **» STYLE** 1-Player Action (Online TBA)
» PUBLISHER Rockstar Games **» DEVELOPER** Rockstar Games **» RELEASE** October 26



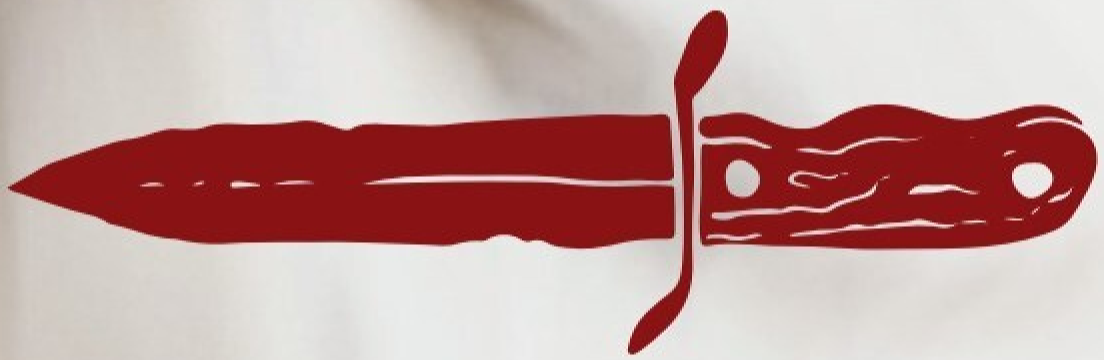
BLOOD, BULLETS, AND BLACKWATER

What happened before John Marston turned traitor? We ran with Dutch's gang for five hours in Red Dead Redemption II to see how Rockstar is pioneering the open-world genre yet again

BY JEFF CORK



DUTCH VAN DER LINDE'S GANG IS ON THE RUN. THE NOTORIOUS BAND OF OUTLAWS PRESSED THEIR LUCK IN BLACKWATER, AND THE RESULTING FALLOUT FROM A FAILED BOAT HEIST HAS BEEN DEVASTATING.



A few dozen stragglers have retreated from the territory of West Elizabeth to the Grizzlies, and the situation is looking grim. Winter has laid claim to the mountainous region and ravaged the wounded. Morale is lower than ever. Through it all, Dutch has done his best to maintain control of a group that, even in good times, resists a guiding hand. Things are going to get worse before they get better – if they ever do.

Red Dead Redemption II is set in 1899, more than a decade before its predecessor, which leads to an obvious question: Don't we already know how this all ends? Former gang member John Marston hunted down his old friends, including Dutch, before he met his own tragic fate. That still holds true, but after playing the game from the beginning for more than five hours, it's clear that there's still plenty of story to uncover – and it takes place in Rockstar's most fully realized world yet.

Forests can get impressively dense, and fog and other weather makes travel treacherous

Since you're a member of a gang, you'll often go on missions with your crew and get to know them all better

ON THE RUN

The wagon train inches up the mountain, while a blizzard shoves it back. There are rumors of an abandoned mining town, which is enough to keep the group limping their way ahead. When they finally reach the camp, they're spent. One man, Davy, is dead. From what they can tell, the law has called off their pursuit. It would be suicide to attempt travel in this kind of weather. Once inside a dilapidated building that once passed for a lodge, Dutch displays the leadership that explains why anyone would bother to follow someone through this kind of frozen hell.

"We're going to ride out and find some food," he tells the group. "We're safe now. Nobody is following us through a storm like this, and by the time they get here we'll be long gone. I need you to turn this into a camp and make it easier for a few days. Everyone get warm, stay strong, stay with me. We ain't done yet. C'mon Arthur." And with that, Dutch and I head out into the unknown.

Before our wagons made it to camp, Dutch sent out a couple of scouts. We get onto our horses with the hope of finding them, and, God willing, supplies to keep our group alive a few more days. Visibility is next to nothing, and there isn't a formal trail to guide us along. I take it on faith and follow Dutch, holding a button to match his pace. There's a reason Dutch picked Arthur to accompany him on this critical part of the journey: He's part of a core group who has run with the leader for the past few decades. By the time we ran into John Marston in the original game, he had broken old alliances for the sake of his family. At this point at least, Arthur is a true believer, even if he is just as confused about how the gang got here as I am.

"What really went down on that boat?" Arthur shouts over the wind.

"We missed you. That's what happened," comes the reply. If answers about Blackwater are coming, they aren't coming anytime soon.

We press on for a bit, eventually coming across gang member Micah Bell. He says there's a homestead not far from our location, and it sounds like they're having a party. Sure enough, after a short ride, we find the cabin. A fiddle plays, and people are laughing and shouting inside. We hitch our horses, and Dutch tells Arthur and Micah to stay out of sight. "Let me handle this," he says. "We don't want to spook these fine people."

The following exchange feels more like a standoff than an introduction, as the people inside warily regard Dutch. They aren't falling for his weary traveler routine, even though he's selling it with everything he's got. Micah gets my attention, and it becomes clear that something's amiss; a corpse is inside the wagon he's been hiding behind. With that, we draw our weapons and prepare for the worst. The worst comes soon enough. One of the men appears to recognize Dutch, blurting out "It's god damned—" before we cut the conversation short with our triggers. The gunplay is familiar, and snapping between targets in and out of the cabin is simple. Arthur is at the peak of his powers, too; he doesn't need to drink a miracle tonic before he can tap into his time-slowing Dead Eye ability, which ends the encounter with a pair of deadly accurate shots.

Inside the cabin, we forage for provisions. I find a horse in the barn, but am attacked by a man before I can calm the animal. After a quick beating, we learn the men were members of Colm O'Driscoll's gang, who are in the region to rob a train. Dutch and O'Driscoll have history, and it isn't good. Dutch tells me to do what I want with the man, but to bring the horse when I'm done. I let him go. Arthur may be an unrepentant outlaw, but he's not a straight-up murderer – at least not for now.

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY

The next few days are eventful. The gang isn't completely in the clear, but they seem to be settling into a new routine. Javier Escuella and I head out to find John Marston, who has been missing since Dutch sent him to scout with Bell earlier. "I know if the situation were reversed, he'd look for me," Escuella says, unaware of how prophetic his words are.

Marston's role in Dutch's gang is one of the most interesting aspects of Red Dead Redemption II. We knew of John as a loyal, dependable man with a dark past. Here, a dozen years before our introduction, he's seen as a bit of a joke. At one point, Arthur calls Marston "as dumb as rocks and as dull as rusted iron." We find John, and during the rescue learn how he got his distinctive facial scars.

There are a lot of people to get to know in Dutch's gang, and unlike characters like Escuella, Bill Williamson, and Dutch himself, we don't have the benefit of having known most of them from the first game. Rockstar does a remarkable job getting players up to speed through dialogue and interpersonal moments, most of which take place in-game as opposed to breaking them out in cutscenes. In the opening hours, Arthur goes on several excursions with a variety of different gang members. On those rides, they talk about Blackwater, share their thoughts on the current state of things, and even discuss the possibility of going straight someday. The conversations feel natural and don't seem as though you're listening to "Exposition Moment #4."

Even though each gang member has their own criminal specialty, they share one common love: money. Dutch has been looking for another lucrative opportunity after the disaster in Blackwater, and it comes after the gang raids an O'Driscoll hideout. There, he finds more information about their planned train robbery, as well as the explosives to pull it off. Our gang also manages to take an O'Driscoll member alive, though the man downplays his involvement. Dutch tells his men to tie up this Kieran Duffy fellow, before giving a chilling speech: "I've got a saying, my friend: We shoot fellas that's need shooting, save fellas that's need saving, and feed 'em that's need feeding. We are going to find out what you need."

Duffy isn't saying much, but that's fine; Dutch has what he needs for the time being. He calls a group of us together to head down the mountain to pull off what he hopes will be a big score. The steady descent from the Grizzlies is transformative. For hours of game time, Arthur has had to push his way through knee-high snow and had his view obscured by blizzards and blinding reflections of the sun on snowdrifts. As the wagon train rattles its way down, packed white trails give way to paths of dirt and mud, and green foliage peeks from between the pines. There's an accompanying sense of relief, and I appreciate the fact that, for the first time since I pressed start, it looks like our gang might actually catch a break.

The job seems simple enough. We survey the tracks from a hill beside the train tunnel. Dutch sends Williamson out to plant the explosives, and I help by stringing the wire between the dynamite and the detonator. Of course, these things rarely go as planned. The detonator fails, and the gang scrambles to salvage the opportunity. Lenny Summers and I manage to dive atop the train as it passes by, and we work our way to the engine. Along the way, Lenny asks what I think we should do next. Pulling the left trigger, I bring up options, such as having him move ahead or stay back as I clear out the cars ahead.

Arthur is part of a seasoned gang of killers, and that's reflected in the action. The A.I. doesn't hang back and let me get all the glory. Instead, characters like Lenny do their damndest to cut down any enemies they see. There are plenty of times where I'm about to dial in a kill only to see my target cut down by a partner's shot. It's a different sensation from a lot of other games, where your teammates often feel as though they're shooting blanks.

Even though the heist didn't work out as planned, the results are the same. We blast open an armored car and end up with valuable bearer bonds – a great haul, for sure, but one that will require some effort to reap. Whether it's the result of the spring air or the feeling of a successful score, one thing's certain: It's time for Dutch's gang to get back to what it does best.

PLANTING ROOTS

Our gang heads down the Grizzlies, and the mood is completely different from our ascent. People are in good spirits, and the weather is beautiful. That doesn't mean that everything is perfect, however. Arthur rides with Hosea, and the old man is still nursing a grudge. Hosea reminds Arthur that the two of them had a lead in Blackwater that the gang could have pursued, and that they both knew that the boat job didn't feel right. "It just isn't like Dutch to lose his head like that," Hosea says. Arthur tries to smooth things over, saying he figures they must have gotten more right than wrong over the years.

The gang sets up their new camp at a place called Horseshoe Overlook. "I've been through a couple of times," Hosea says. "There's a livestock town not too far from here called Valentine. Cowboys, outlaws, working girls, our kind of place." Now that things are settled down, I get to see what the gang does on their own time. Members fan out into the world, each with their own schemes – with the understanding that they keep low profiles and kick a share back to the camp coffers. One of the first to go is a studious looking man named Leopold Strauss, an Austrian loan shark. Valentine is his kind of town, indeed.

Now, for the first time since I started, the world is truly open. The camp is bustling with activity, as characters go about their various routines. I talk to Dutch and then grab a bowl of stew from the camp kitchen. The camp has its own needs – ammunition, medicine, and food – and I can choose to help pitch in whenever I want or ignore it altogether and let someone else deal with those chores. Morale improves the more I help, however, which is just one of the incentives to do so. For now, I want to head to Valentine and see what it's like. I run into our gang's resident drunk, Uncle, taking a nap against the wagon. I ask what he's doing, and he says he's thinking. "So. While the rest of us are busy stealing, killing, lying, fighting to try to survive, you get to think all day?" Arthur asks. "Yeah, it's a strange world we live in, Arthur Morgan," he responds. Uncle wants to head into town, and so do Karen Jones, Tilly Jackson, and Mary-Beth Gaskill. The ladies sing a bawdy song on the wagon ride down the road, giggling and messing up the lyrics at times.

Halfway there, we come upon a man whose horse has bolted away. I get off the wagon and lasso the animal, leading it back to its grateful owner. Arthur tells the man he was only trying to impress the women. Heading down the road, Uncle is clearly not impressed, and says Arthur is turning into a regular fairy godmother.

Players have their honorable and dishonorable deeds tallied as they play, though Rockstar says it's not as linear a system as it was in the first game. The effects of being a hero or scoundrel are both subtle and far-reaching. Players who go out of their way to help others are rewarded with higher bounty rewards and townsfolk that don't flee on sight. On the other hand, if you prefer to become a highwayman and rob people who pass by on the trail, you'll get better prices at illicit fence operations and respect from fellow outlaws. In addition, the musical score shifts to reflect your moral alignment, and your character's posture and

Your crew includes a variety of murderers and scam artists. These ladies specialize in robbing unsuspecting men

Dutch keeps order in the camp, and you can contribute to upgrade the gang's HQ

facial animations change. Even your killcams highlight different aspects of your moral character – heroic slow-motion for the good guys, and more brutal actions if you choose to black hat your way through life.

Valentine is a mid-sized town surrounded by hills. It looks like there's a lot to do, and my passengers waste little time finding it. I stick with Uncle, and we go to the general store to pick up some supplies. You can choose to browse the shelves, similar to how Ammu-Nation works in Grand Theft Auto V, or flip through a catalog. The catalog is a little easier to navigate, and it's filled with period language and illustrations. It includes a large section of clothing options, too, such as hats, vests, pants, coats, and more. If you like playing dress-up in games, the cosmetics appear to run far deeper than the handful of outfits offered in Red Dead Redemption.

In addition to the general store, there's a gun shop, stable, and street vendor to lighten your wallet, as well as a few watering holes. People mill around, adding to the feeling that it's a bustling town and not just an NPC dumping ground.

Dutch implored us to stay out of trouble, but sometimes trouble seeks you out. I see Charles and Javier in the saloon, where they're trying their best to impress a couple of working girls. Arthur isn't much of a charmer, opening their interaction by asking how much they cost. "Well, ain't that a nice way to talk to a lady," one responds. "Oh," Arthur shoots back. "I didn't know I was talking to a lady." And with that, the trio drinks alone. It wouldn't be a saloon without a fight, and soon enough our friend Bill Williamson gets into it with some locals. It's a classic western fight, with broken tables, smashed chairs, and a piano player who scurries out at the first sign of trouble. I'm able to hold my own, but then a bruiser stomps down the stairs and throws me through the window. Hand-to-hand combat is more involved than in past Rockstar games, and it offers a fair bit of depth. After a few minutes of blocking and parrying his attacks and getting in a few solid counters, I knock him down to the muddy street – to the amusement (and horror) of the assembled crowd of onlookers that has dynamically drawn close to watch the show.

Rockstar says that if I'd gotten into trouble in Valentine before accepting the saloon mission, Charles and Javier would have come out to help – the characters are in the world, and not just spawned in for the sake of missions. In that instance, the saloon mission might not have been available afterward, thanks to whatever chaos we may have caused in the streets.

Arthur is caked with mud, so I take him to the hotel for a bath before checking out a quick movie. While I could have let it dry, there's something undignified about catching a flick covered in mud. The film is a glorified slideshow, but it's still an entertaining diversion.

Red Dead Redemption II retains the moody, methodical pace of exploration in the open world

Inclimate weather rolls in realistically

R.L. DALTON
WEAPONS SOLD
BEST QUALITY
GUNS IN THE STATE
GUNSMITH
LAW OFFICE

Cities have an abundance of life, and plenty of activities to get lost in

BLACK BELLE, AND A BAD LOSER

In a bar down the street, I run into a man who's trying to write a biography about a famed gunslinger, Jim Boy Calloway, known as the fastest left-handed draw who ever drew breath. Calloway has obviously seen better days, as he's slumped onto the bar, blacked out. I agree to help the biographer out with his plan B, which involves tracking down some other gunslingers and getting their stories about Calloway.

I start by finding a woman named Black Belle. Her last-known location is in a swamp, and I set my waypoint on the map. It's about a 10-minute ride, even at a steady gallop. The world is big and beautiful, but more importantly there are things to do. During the trip I watch a guy get kicked in the head by his horse (and lose honor points by looting his body), help a man stuck in a bear trap, and get my fortune told by a man called Old Blind Man Cassidy. "Just as evil begat evil your whole life long, so good may begat good," he says.

While larger-scale missions are denoted with easy-to-see icons on the map, these diversions pop up around me without much to-do. I'm able to choose whether to engage with these vignette-like gameplay moments or keep riding along. Since the rewards can be lucrative – financially and morally – I'm more inclined to participate.

Red Dead Redemption's campaign had a serious arc, but there were moments that leaned more toward the Weird West end of things. From my time with Red Dead Redemption II, things seem significantly more grounded. That's not to say that it's not funny, but that the humor is more about the funny things that the characters are saying than in leaning into weird characterizations such as body-defiling prospectors. If that kind of silly stuff is in the game, I didn't see it.

I won't spoil what happens with Black Belle, but she's a great example of a character delivering humor without being a punchline. Suffice it to say, it's a case where that biographer may have picked the wrong subject.

On the ride back to camp, I swing by a ranch to see what's happening. There isn't much activity, aside from a few cattle and sheep, and a friendly game of dominos is what passes for excitement. I pull up a chair and join in. One of the best things about Red Dead Redemption was the slow, almost meditative, pace exploration embodied. You're traveling predominantly on foot or horseback, which has a significantly different feeling from whirling a car around corners at 90 miles an hour. In this kind of world, a relaxing game of dominos is just the ticket. At least until I lose.

I was about ready to walk away with a smile on my face, when the winner made a little gloating remark. I look at him, and then pull up an interaction menu. When you see an NPC, you can choose several different ways of engaging them, if you want. In addition to friendly greetings, you can rob them or try to intimidate them. I try to talk him into fighting, and he obliges. After a few punches, I knock him out and take on his friend for good measure. I riffle through his pockets for the $4 pot – not my biggest score, but it'll have to do. I also take his hat for good measure.

Unfortunately, the remaining player sees it all go down and alerts the law. I get on my horse and hoof away from the crime scene, but soon get a notification that there's now a bounty on my head. And, to add insult to injury, it's $5.

A bow is an essential weapon if you want to remain undetected while hunting

HUNTING PARTY

Back at camp, I meet up with Hosea. He says he's been itching to go hunting, ever since learning about a legendary bear who stalks the woods nearby. Going after a beast that's purportedly 1,000 pounds doesn't exactly sound safe, but what do I have to lose at this point?

We head out, stopping by Valentine to sell a horse that Hosea has recently "acquired" during his travels. Since we don't have the paperwork on it, I'm unable to get top dollar for the animal, but I do get enough in the transaction to buy the stable's cheapest option. At first, I think the mare is covered in freckles, but I realize it's just filthy. I dismount and clean her with my brush, making her look about as good as can be. "Interesting choice," Hosea sniffs, though he says that if I spend enough time with her I could make something out of her. Indeed, the longer you spend on your horse, the tighter your bond grows, through four levels. Each level provides a new riding ability, like being able to rear up on command, perform dressage, and eventually pull off the equine version of drifting with a slide turn.

Overall, the horse riding is a marked improvement over Red Dead Redemption's. The horse obeys commands but also acts with its own kind of intelligence; it doesn't feel like you're on the back of a four-legged robot. At one point I'm getting fancy with the camera, and don't realize that I'm heading toward a rock. The horse bucks me off, and I flop onto the ground. Lesson learned. If you want to focus on the game's breathtaking visuals, you can have the horse stick to the trail automatically while the camera cycles through a variety of different cinematic angles. It's a great option for when you tire of looking at your horse's rear. If you prefer, you can also use first-person mode.

Hosea and I ride down the trail for a while before we break camp for the night. I hunt down some rabbits for supper, which is easy to do thanks to an Eagle Eye vision mode. It's similar to the alternate-view mode you see in a lot of games now, where colors momentarily desaturate and points of interest – animals in this case – are highlighted. Rockstar's take is a little different, however. When you use the view, animals and their tracks are highlighted. If you look at their trail and press a button, it highlights the trail for a period of time when you return to normal vision. It's a clever way to provide the benefit of an alternate vision without forcing you to see the game through a distorted lens for longer than you need to.

Rockstar has done a particularly great job in replicating the outdoors – no small detail, considering just how much time you spend there. Forests get appropriately dense, and wildlife is abundant, with more than 200 different types of birds, beasts, and fish. And while the game features a score that has more than 100 different pieces of music, the sounds of nature are a big component of the audio landscape. At several times during the demo, I was certain that a persistent fly was near my head, but it was just part of the game.

I take down the rabbit with a bow, and then skin our dinner. Unlike the last game, the camera doesn't pull away during this action. Arthur holds the creature with one hand and pulls its hide off in one smooth motion with the other. Skinning deer is a more complicated process, with Arthur sliding his knife down the creature's belly and methodically removing the hide. Hides can be sold or used to craft apparel, and meat can be eaten – such as the rabbit, which Arthur roasts on their campfire. After eating, we go to bed in our makeshift camp with full bellies. That's an important new element to the game, since Arthur needs to eat and sleep. When he's full, for instance, he can regenerate health more quickly. It didn't seem like a fussy component to the game, but I dipped into my in-game satchel to eat a few oatcakes or other foods that I scavenged to keep Arthur full.

The next morning, we craft some bear bait with fish and berries, and try to track down the legendary beast. I'm able to track it using clues, such as a half-eaten fish, pile of scat, and broken branches. Hosea says we're close, and I'm given the choice between splitting up or dropping the bait and staying together. Splitting up seems like a bad idea, so I drop the stinky bait and we hide behind some boulders. Less than a minute passes before Hosea starts fussing about the bait. Did I mix it correctly? Did I put it in the right spot? We move out, only to realize just how effective it was – just a few feet away, the bear appears, raising on its hind legs and roaring. I enter Dead Eye and paint its massive body with targets. It's enough to scare the beast off.

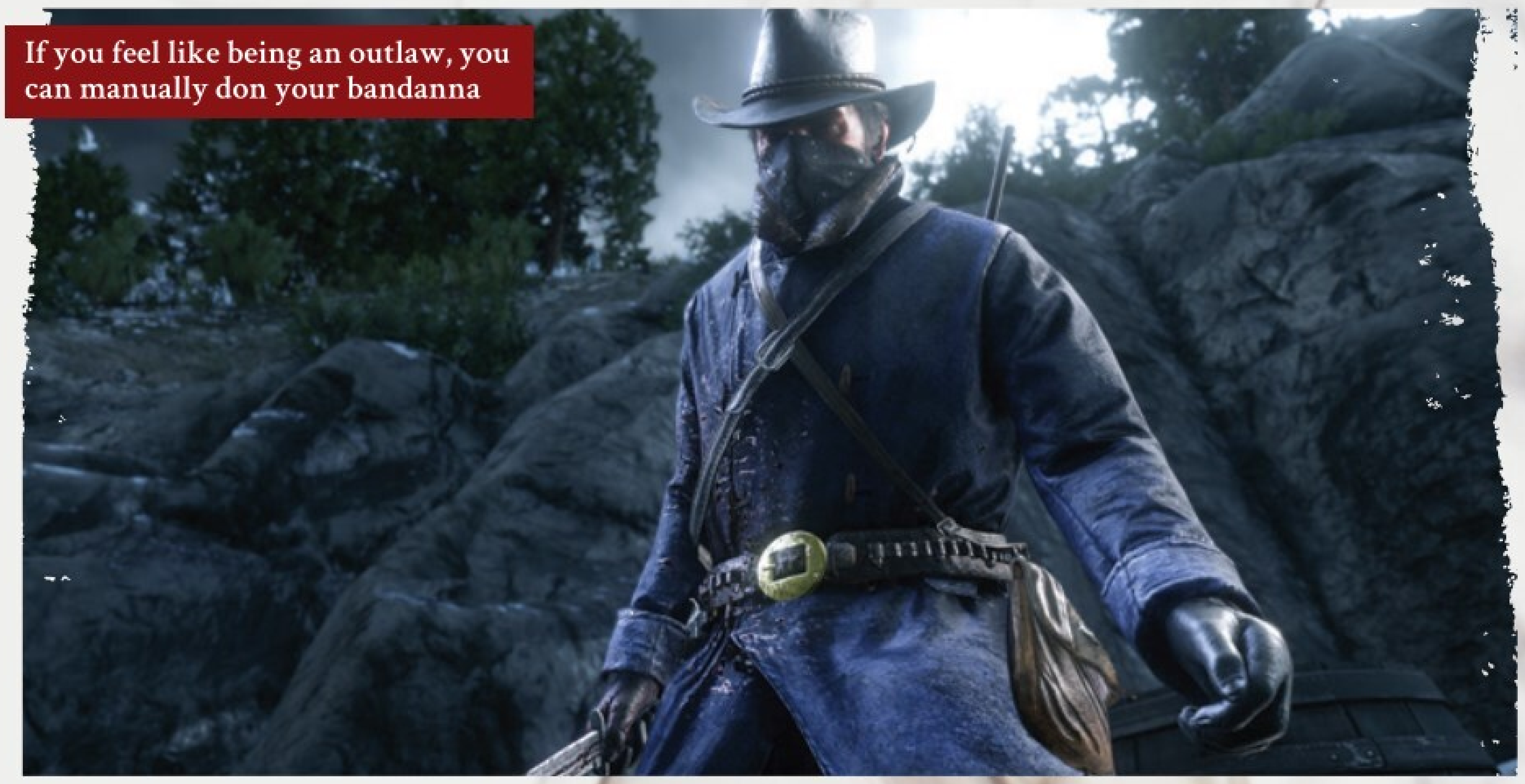
Hosea is grateful for saving his life, and he gives me a book of maps in gratitude. "A man in a bar gave it to me," he says, adding, "well, I stole it from him, but that's another story." He heads back to camp, giving me the option of going back with him or seeing if I can finish the bear off. I tell him I'm going to try my luck and see if I can't finish what I started. And with that, Hosea rides out of sight.

WHO IS ARTHUR MORGAN?

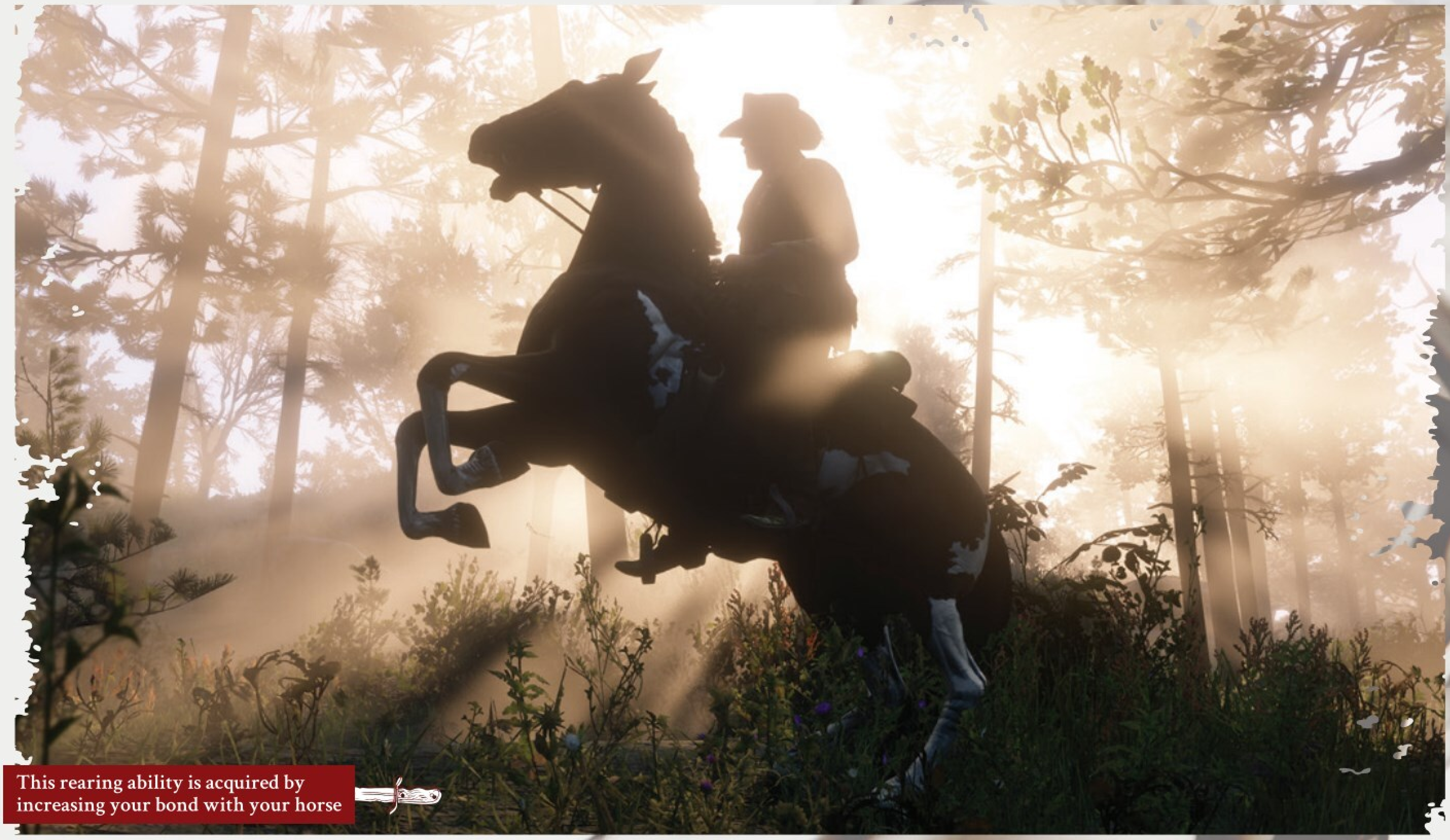
The biggest takeaway from my time with Red Dead Redemption II – and Arthur – wasn't centered around any kind of revelatory character moments. I'm sure those will come later. What struck me most is how rooted he was to the world around him. Rockstar has pioneered the open-world genre for decades, and with Red Dead Redemption II, they've outdone themselves. It's a role-playing game in the truest sense of the word. You are inhabiting this role in ways that few, if any, other games have attempted.

You won't end up with a Level 38 Arthur Morgan, or anything like that. Instead, there's a feeling that you inhabit the world. A lot of open-world games fill the screen with icons representing things to do, and that's fine. In this game, you're given things to do between those activities, which are small but meaningful. The game isn't attempting to be a simulation like Don't Starve, but you need to eat and sleep. You can make your firearms more effective by maintaining them with gun oil. Even something as seemingly insignificant as being able to say hello to a passing traveler adds to the overall tone – even if they look at the gut-shotted deer carcass stowed on the back of your horse and sarcastically ask if it's your first time hunting.

Arthur Morgan is still surrounded with mystery, which is why it was so interesting to step into his boots. We know what happened to Javier, Bill, Dutch, Abigail, and other members of the gang, but Arthur's fate is unknown. Did he manage to get out and start a life away from Dutch's crew? Was he killed in another failed heist? Arthur may be an outlaw, but hopefully he's able to find his own kind of peace along the way. ◆



If you feel like being an outlaw, you can manually don your bandanna



This rearing ability is acquired by increasing your bond with your horse

Just Cause 4

Avalanche puts lightning in a battle

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Avalanche

» Release
December 4

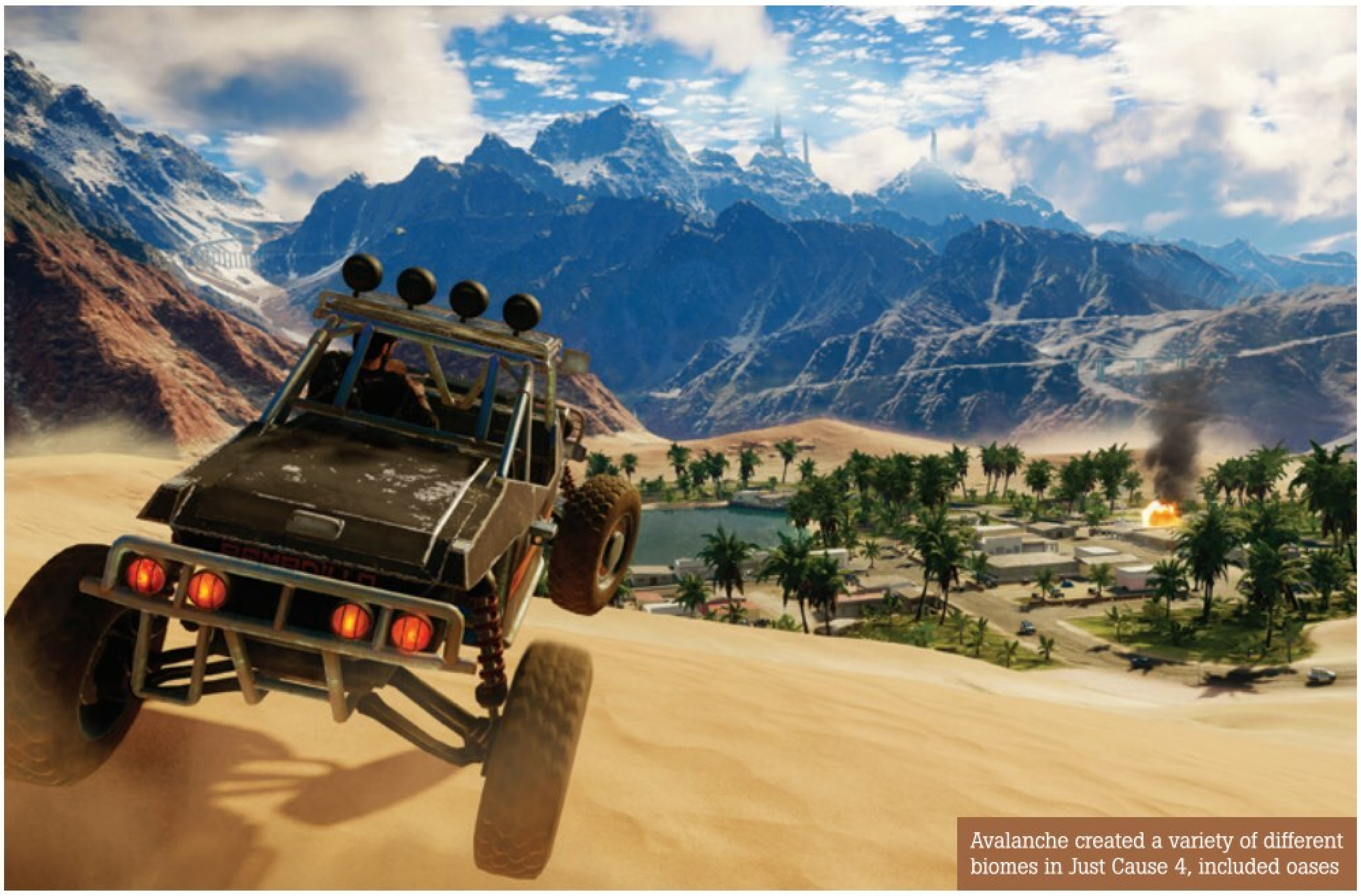
Just Cause 4's director, Francesco Antolini, says his team started development with the opportunity to add a new layer on the franchise's sandbox. In a series known for carnage, destruction, and all that good stuff, the direction they took seems a little mundane on its surface. Wind? Really?

"In a normal game you go, 'Oh, you put wind into the game. OK, cool, now you've got vegetation that wiggles,'" he jokes. "But in your game if you're going to use a parachute and wingsuit, there are opportunities where wind becomes meaningful. And it's from there that we evolved the concept of extreme weather. The thought process was, OK, wind works. It's fine. Next you have the updraft, and it's nice to have the updraft, it's nice to be pushed on the wingsuit, but it's not over the top yet. How do we make it over the top? A tornado. And then from there we expanded to the whole range of extreme weather."

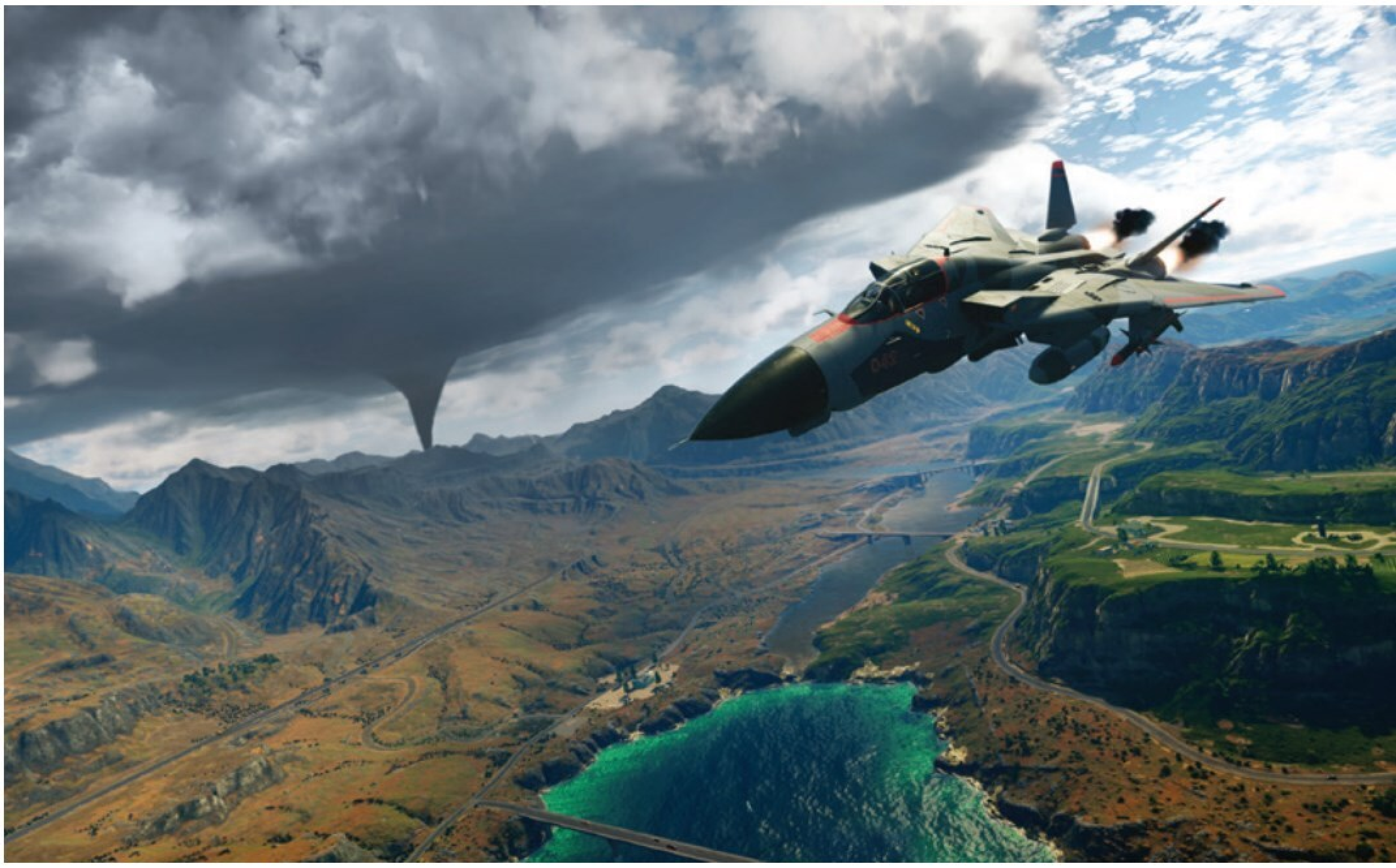
That transition from rustling shrubs to weather events that will flat out kill you seems to be the direction Just Cause needed. We saw what the tornado could do at the game's E3 debut, but when it comes to pants-wetting weather phenomena, it's tough to beat lightning. Just Cause 4's lightning storms are prevalent in the game's rainforest biomes, and they function much the same way as they do in real life. Lightning has a tendency to hit the highest things in its path – and considering that Rico's preferred modes of transportation are a parachute and wingsuit, that spells trouble for our hero.

Before the blasts hit, Rico is warned by a visual crackling effect, a la how Link knows he's going to get zapped in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Players only have a few precious seconds to begin their initial descent or get close to something that's at a higher elevation. If that happens to be an enemy structure or, better still, a hostile attack helicopter, that's a bonus.

The island nation of Solis is home to a variety of different biomes, and



Avalanche created a variety of different biomes in Just Cause 4, included oases



each one has its own unique weather hazards. In addition to the tornados and lightning storms, players will have to contend with blizzards in the alpine regions and desert sandstorms. Just Cause 4 is being built with Avalanche's in-house Apex Engine, which was used to create Mad Max's memorable storms. Antolini says developers who worked on that game are collaborating with their team to ensure that Just Cause 4's sandstorms measure up. "They are helping us right now to make it look even better, so I think they don't think it's up to par yet," he says, laughing.

The weather can be weaponized, but that's clearly not the only tool in Rico's arsenal. The team has worked to make the game its best playground yet, which we see in another memorable demo. At one point, Antolini says they noticed that a piece of in-game equipment looked a little like a catapult – so they decided to lean into that resemblance. Now, players can attach items such as cars to the device with tethers and hurl them into the distance. Add a few thrusters and connect some explosive barrels to it, and that car becomes a long-range improvised rocket.

Antolini says he wants to encourage that kind of improvisation and experimentation, and that carries over to the weapons Rico carries around with him. "Without naming names, in another open-world game I played recently, there were like 60 different weapons but I played from beginning to end without ever changing them. I didn't want for that situation to happen here." He references Breath of the Wild, saying many players initially didn't like how the weapons broke in that game. "If you think about it, that's a device that forces you to switch weapons continuously. Our weapons do not break, but what happens is when you run out of ammo you throw them away, so you're forced to find another one."

Considering Rico lives in a world where a propane tank is a flying bomb that just doesn't know it yet, that doesn't seem limiting by any stretch of the imagination. » **Jeff Cork**

Biomutant

Kung-fu critters make their way in the wastelands

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
THQ Nordic

» Developer
Experiment 101

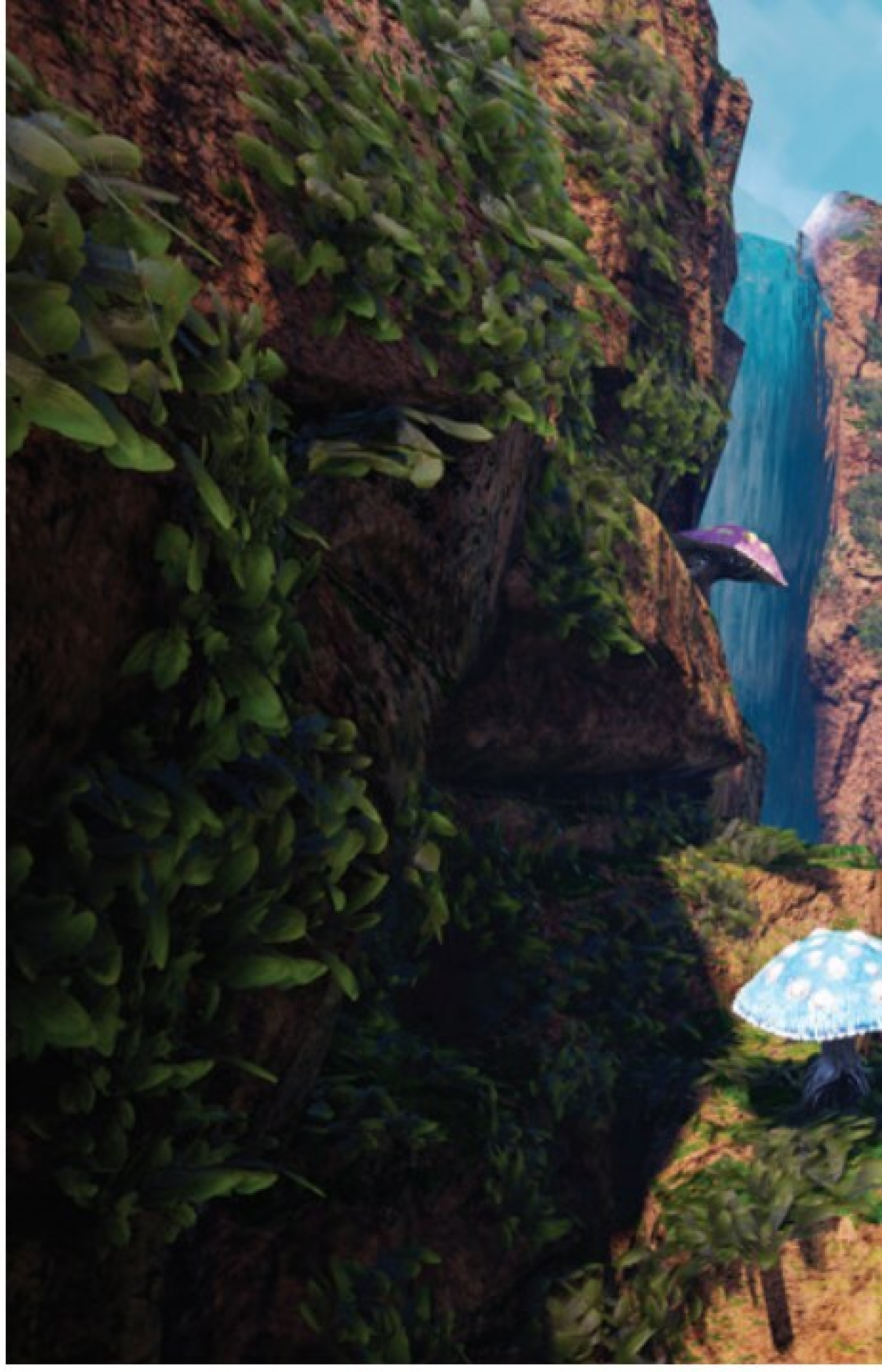
» Release
Summer

Biomutant offers an intriguing blend of ideas that are so crazy it just might work. Developer Experiment 101 wasn't content to drop players into an ordinary post-apocalyptic world, so the Swedish studio populated it with genetically modified animals who are as skilled behind the sticks of a mech as they are with giant swords, pistols, and other weapons. All the while, this futuristic fable is narrated by an unseen presence who weighs in on what's happening. As I saw during a recent demo, there's certainly a lot to comment on.

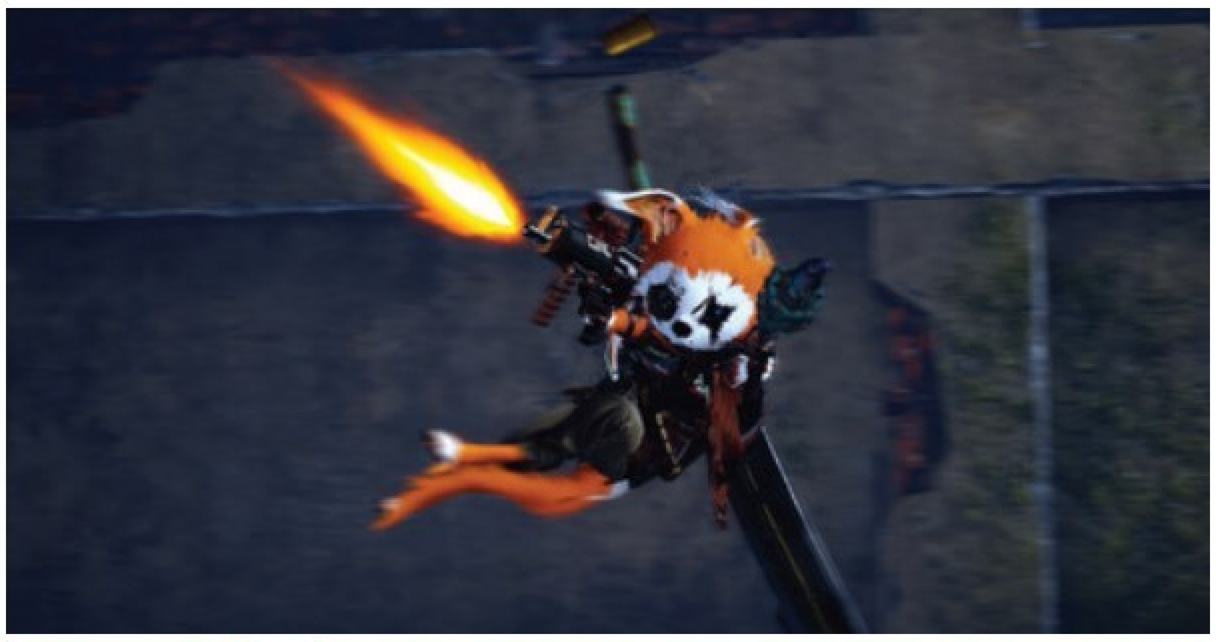
Thanks to a robust character creator, you can design a critter that suits both your sense of aesthetics and playstyle. Those elements aren't completely separate, either. If you increase the size of your character's noggin to *Megamind* proportions, for instance, you'll be more adept at using psionic abilities. One of the most interesting aspects of the game is how you can modify your hero throughout his or her journey, so it's quite likely that what you end up with near the end will be unrecognizable from how you started off.

There are a variety of different tribes and clans in the open world, and it's up to you to determine whether you'd like to become allies or take on a more adversarial approach. We see what conflict is like as we enter an area surrounded with high doses of radioactivity. We surprise a tribe of hunters that's in the process of trapping a much larger creature, and it breaks free. Our character is equipped with a katana, and he cuts the smaller enemies to ribbons with his nimble attacks – while avoiding tail swipes from the agitated beast. Once our wushu meter is filled, we unleash a devastating attack, in which we pivot from one foe to the next so quickly that we may as well be teleporting.

You don't have to play as the speedy type, though. If you prefer to hit hard, the Klonk Fist might be for you. This gauntlet lets you pass through special doors by, well, punching through them, but it's also handy in battle. You can grab smaller enemies and slam them into the ground with the glove, or even use them as improvised bowling balls against their buddies. In one of the best parts of the demo, we see how it fares against a miniboss. After several pummeling blows, the brute is driven into the ground like a nail.



Biomutant's world is a dangerous place, but you can help mitigate some of that by finding hazmat suits and other gear to protect against the environment. Better yet, you can pilot and customize your own mech (silly heads, anyone?) – provided you find the scrap. The mech isn't just a handy way of



preventing suffocation, either, as we learn while facing off against a boss called the Jumbo Puff. Trust us: He's meaner than his name might lead you to believe.

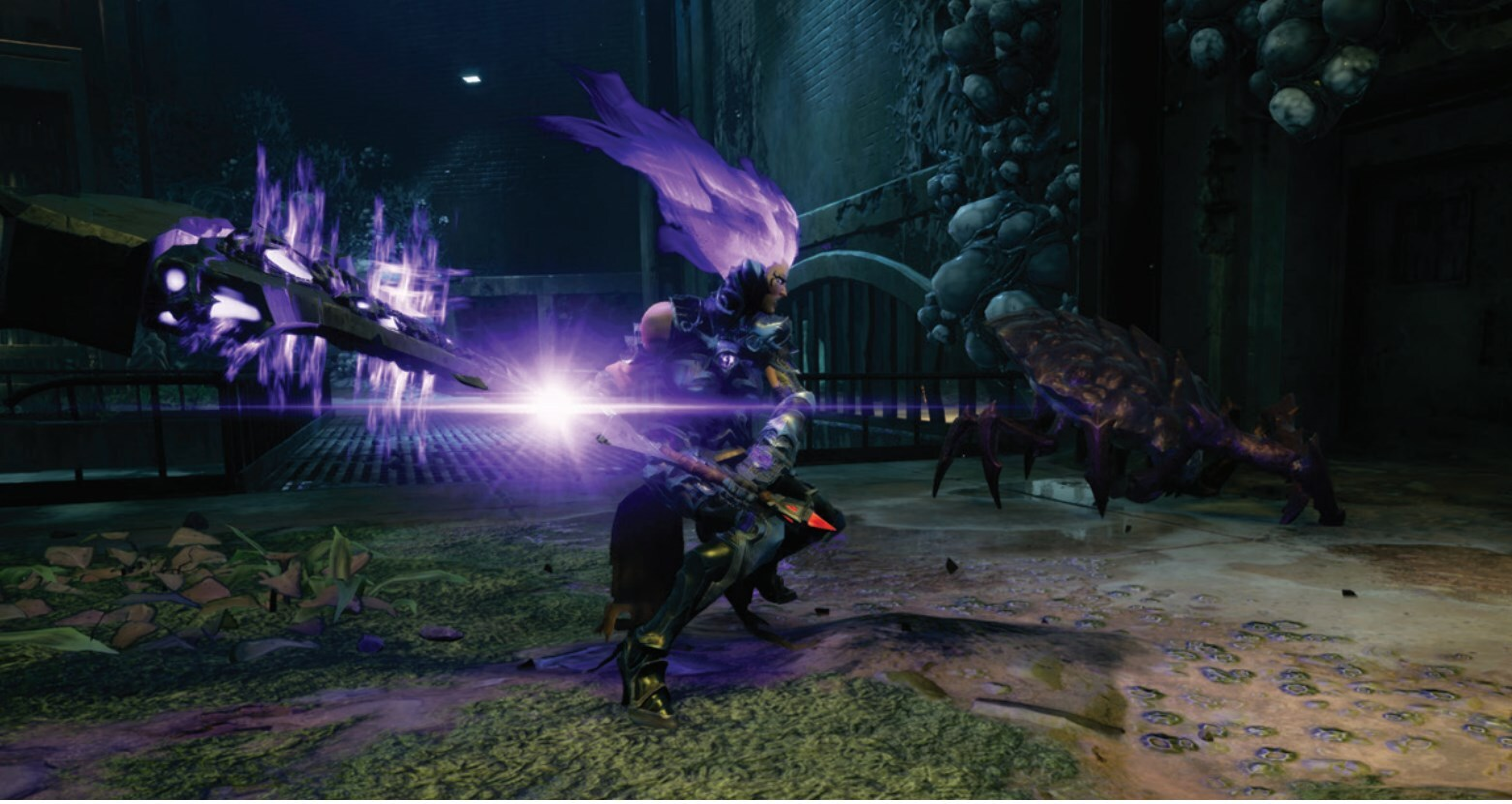
Jumbo Puff is a world eater, one of several monsters who is destroying the roots of a monumental tree. This titanic beast looks like a furry platypus, with the notable distinction being that its bill-like maw is lined with an intimating array of fangs. It's also quite large – think along the lines of something you'd see in Monster Hunter: World, and you're on the right track. The battle takes place in the ruins of a city, and the beast takes full advantage of its surroundings. It knocks down entire buildings with a single swipe, and it can imbue itself with shocking powers by gnawing on power lines.

From inside our mech's cockpit, we're able to fire living bullets at the beast's mouth while avoiding its lunges and attacks. Once full, Jumbo Puff plops onto the ground and lets its tongue sag out. That's our cue to rush in for a few additional hits. This back and forth continues for a while until the monster is sick of our games. It crunches open our cockpit and swallows our hero whole. The battle continues from inside its disgusting gullet, where we avoid getting pooped out and work our way to its vital organs. Several heart attacks later, and victory is ours. That particular tree root is healed, and we made a positive impression on the world. As we soak up the win, Experiment 101 cryptically says that that's only one possible outcome, however.

We're eager to make our marks on the world one way or another, but we'll have to be a little more patient. The game is set for a release next summer.

» **Jeff Cork**

You'll be able to shape how the world grows and develops through your choices



Darksiders III

The search for Sloth

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
THQ Nordic

» Developer
Gunfire Games

» Release
November 27

The Darksiders trilogy tells the story of an angels-versus-demons apocalypse that wasn't supposed to happen and the Horsemen of the Apocalypse involved in the event. The first Darksiders followed Horseman War's story, while the second followed Death. For the third entry, you play as Fury as she attempts to rid the world of the seven deadly sins.

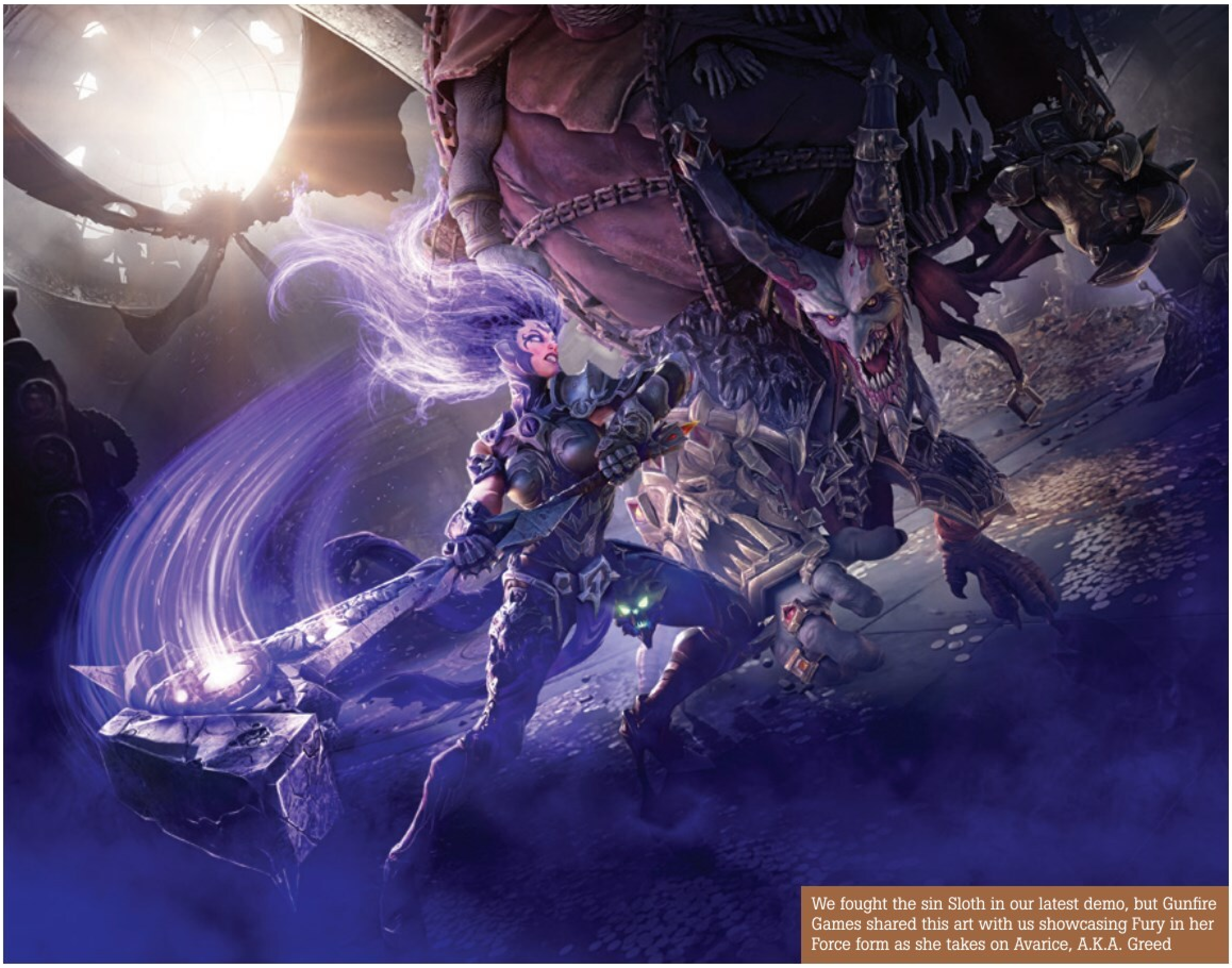
The last time we checked in with Fury's hunt, we fought and defeated Envy, a cantankerous crow creature who lived up to her namesake by wanting everything Fury had. For our latest taste of Darksiders III, we explored apocalyptic underground subway systems in order to track down Sloth.

This play session pushes us forward in the adventure revealing a slew of new abilities and weapons for Fury. Along with her standard form, Fury can instantly shift into new Hollow forms that change her weapons, combos, abilities, and appearance. Regardless of her form, she can always use the barbed whip as her main weapon. In her Fire Hollow form, Fury's hair turns into flames and her body takes on an emblazoned form. Along with her whip, she also uses the Chains of Scorn, a quick flaming short-range weapon that I can use both on its own, or alongside my whip for elaborate combos. The Fire Hollow form also allows Fury to do a flaming triple jump, and after building up a meter below her health bar, she can set herself fully on fire to speed up her attacks for a short period of time.

I also have access to the Force Hollow, which changes Fury's coloring to a shadowy, deep purple while her hair becomes wispy as though it is underwater. In this form, she can use the Mallet of Scorn, a slow but powerful hammer weapon. Executing a fully charged meter in this form wraps Fury in a shield of stone and slams her to the ground for a powerful area-of-effect attack.

As I journey underground to search for Sloth, I come across a familiar face. Vulgrim, the merchant and fast-travel aficionado from the first two Darksiders, is there offering an assortment of wares, level-up opportunities, and shortcuts through the world.

Writers' collective Man of Action Entertainment is writing Darksiders III, which is a good fit because one of its members, Joe Kelly, co-wrote the original game



We fought the sin Sloth in our latest demo, but Gunfire Games shared this art with us showcasing Fury in her Force form as she takes on Avarice, A.K.A. Greed

At this point it seems the two have already met and their interaction is strictly business.

Further into the underground I discover something I have never encountered before in Darksiders – a living human. He's at the end of a hallway off the main path, and he looks like you assume a survivor of the apocalypse would, scarred and dressed in improvised clothing and armor. Fury doesn't say anything to him, but holds up a talisman capable of storing souls. It's the same one she used to capture Envy after defeating her, and he gets sucked inside. I don't know how surviving humans play into the larger Darksiders III experience, but I was surprised to see him.

Later I engage with a giant spider, who bests me and spins me into a cocoon. Fury's Watcher, a character that accompanies her offering hints and direction, demands the spider tell her where it is taking Fury. I awake in the spider's lair in the cocoon above a giant pile of skeletal remains, but break free and make my way forward. I find Vulgrim again, thankful since his appearance serves as a checkpoint for when I die.

Despite being underground all along, it isn't until now that I step into a pitch-black area and my Watcher jokes that I should use my hair to light the way – which I do by switching to my Fire Hollow form. After fighting a few more tough enemies, and finding another Vulgirm checkpoint, I finally find Sloth.

Much like Envy before him, his name is the perfect descriptor for his personality and design. The giant, obese bug creature sits on a throne of stone which is carried by a cast of monster crabs. Fury warns that he will be judged in combat, to which he points to his appearance and asks, "Does it look I will be fighting anytime soon?" He's a nihilist who berates Fury's interest in bringing balance (the goal of all the Horsemen of the Apocalypse) and says, "My sole concern is comfort." He invites Fury to join him and relax in the apocalypse, which she briefly considers before starting the fight.

Sloth commands an army of monsters who attack while he leisurely throws globules of poison. I focus on the crab army supporting his throne, and after taking enough out, Sloth pulls himself from his throne to face me head on. I die a few times during the fight, forcing me back to the closest Vulgrim checkpoint. This encourages me to do something that will be familiar to any Dark Souls fan: make a mad sprint back to the boss avoiding enemies along the way. After a few tries, I take him down and suck him up into the talisman that also houses Envy.

Comparing a hard game to Dark Souls is an overused cliché, but it feels appropriate here. The monsters Fury takes on are different than the ones her brothers fought. Enemies are fewer, but they hit harder and have more health, and the way you collect experience and use checkpoints is clearly inspired by From Software's increasingly ubiquitous franchise. It's a change from the previous games, but it feels right. The challenge is a surprise, but a welcome one. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Where Are The Puzzles?

All of our gameplay demos to date have mostly focused on Fury's combat, but the Darksiders series is about more than just action. We haven't had a chance to try and solve any puzzles in Darksiders III yet, but they are definitely there. "It wouldn't be a Darksiders game if we didn't have puzzles," says Darksiders III senior designer Richard Vorodi. "The main reason for this is that we are contextualizing the puzzles more for this game." Zelda was a clear influence on the overall structure and puzzles of the previous games, but Darksiders III looks toward a different Nintendo source for its puzzle design. "If Darksiders I had Zelda in its DNA, then Darksiders III is definitely cousins with Metroid," Vorodi says. "We definitely have some headscratchers in there, but most of the game is weighted more towards exploration as the main puzzle to solve compared to previous installments."

Anthem

Single-player story in a multiplayer shooter

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online
Multiplayer Shooter

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
BioWare

» Release
February 22

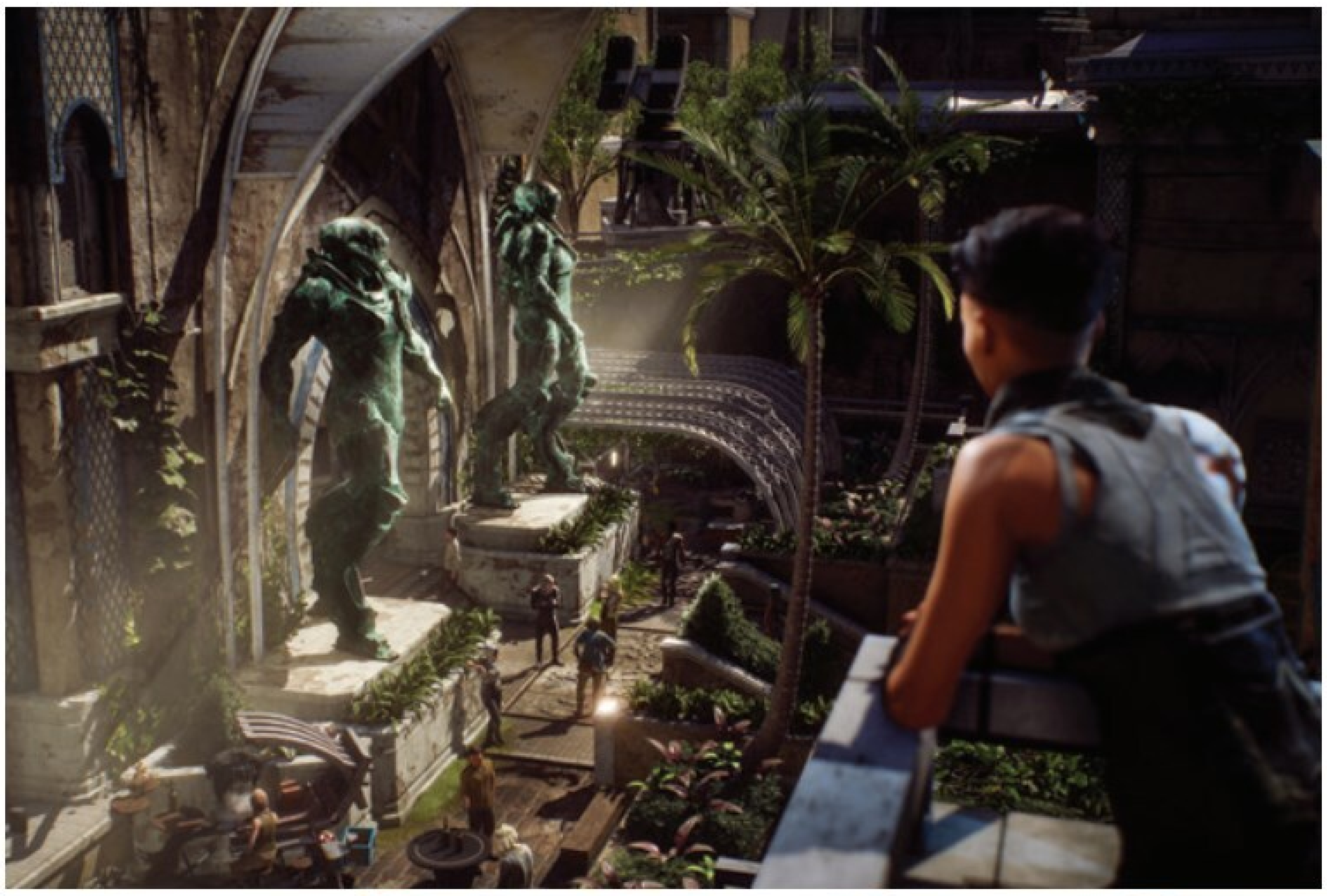
During PAX West, Anthem's executive producer Mark Darrah and lead producer Mike Gamble presented a panel to announce an upcoming demo (alongside its already planned closed and open betas) and offered lots more details on how the game's narrative will unfold and we spoke with the two afterward. The structure of the story is something BioWare has discussed before (including in our own cover story on the game), but because Anthem is an online shooter – a genre not typically suited to engaging stories full of choice – the developer wanted to assure fans of its previous story-focused games (Mass Effect, Dragon Age) that Anthem is worth getting excited about.

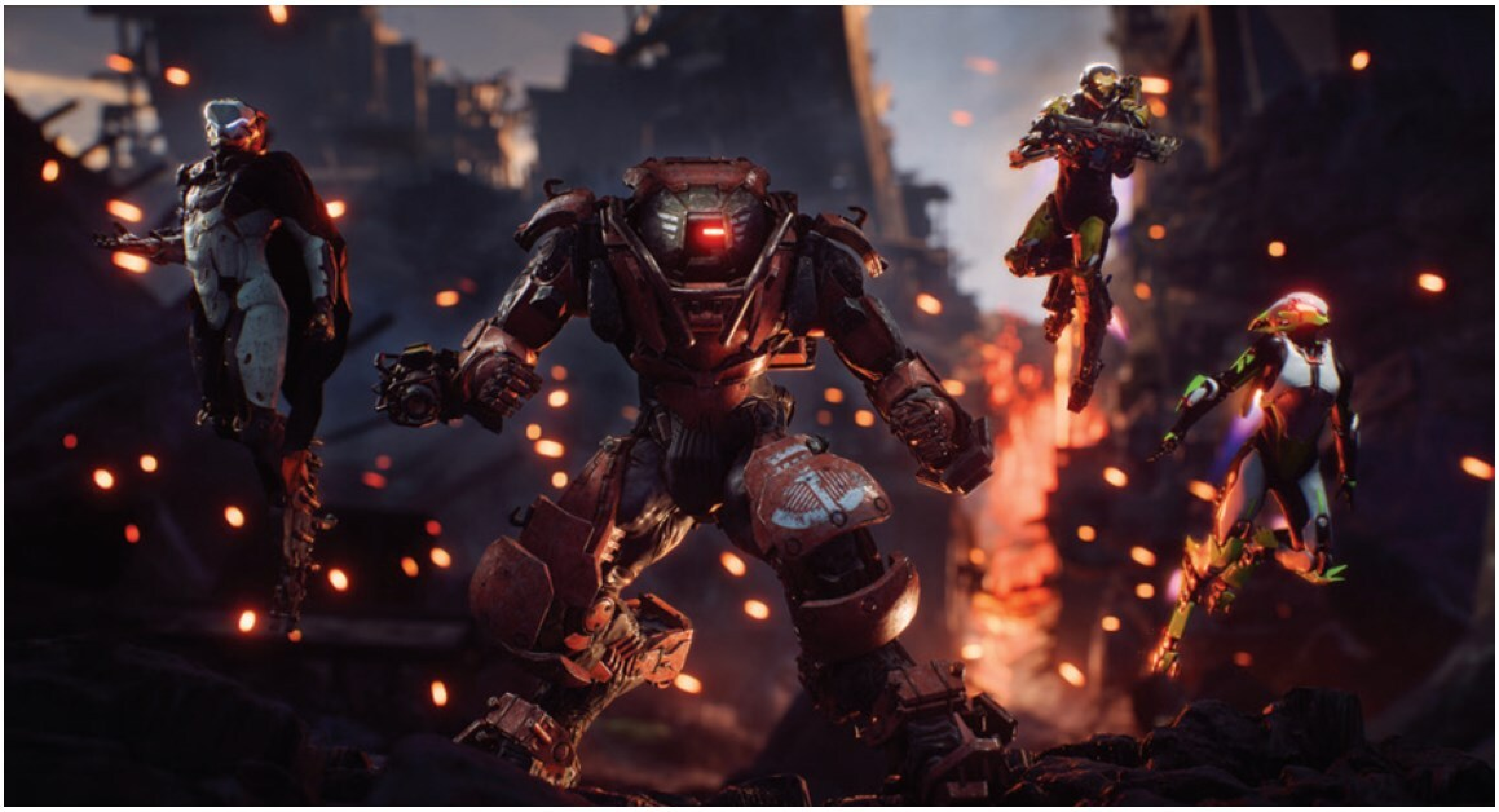
A typical Anthem session is divided into two distinct gameplay styles. When you take on missions, you will leave the safety of your home city, Fort Tarsis, to venture out into the world with up to three other players. These players will either be a pre-established party, if you're playing with friends, or a match-made group that is automatically assigned. The action here is third-person and involves shooting monsters and jetpacking your way around the lush world of Anthem. Between those missions, you will be in Fort Tarsis.

In Fort Tarsis, the game is played in first-person and you have the opportunity to walk around, talk to people, acquire upgrades, make decisions about where the story goes next, and generally soak up the atmosphere. This portion of the game will feel familiar to the other BioWare storytelling experiences, but the choices you are periodically presented with will be binary. "We don't want to throw [players] into the deep end of BioWare conversation choices," Darrah says when we ask if the simplified choices are in place to attract a larger, more casual audience. "We want to give a simple A/B choice to give [players] agency, but not give them a bunch of agonizing decision-making every time they talk to somebody."

The decisions you make in Fort Tarsis will only affect your game. You may be on the same missions with other players, even your friends, but the decisions they made in their version of Fort Tarsis have no bearing on you. Fort Tarsis is not a communal space – it's a place for you to experience your own story. The idea, Darrah and Gamble say, is to make the player feel like the protagonist of their version of Anthem. You may be playing with others while on missions, but the choices you make in your city will bend and change Anthem's story only for you.

From its inception, Anthem was built as a long-term continuous story and experience. There is no conclusive finale, per se, but Darrah suggests that players will see a satisfying ending, referencing the destruction of the Death Star in the first *Star Wars*. The Empire is still out there, but the heroes did win. "You want world conflict to continue in any game – in Mass Effect, in Dragon Age – you want that world conflict to continue,’ Darrah says. "Otherwise if everything is perfect, that's it. Series over." Gamble adds to Darrah's point saying, "This was Mass Effect 1. Reapers are still coming, but you stopped Saren." » **Kyle Hilliard**





Do Mass Effect And Anthem Take Place In The Same Universe?

Mass Effect takes place in our future. There are even portions of the trilogy that take place on Earth and its moon. Anthem is a sci-fi story that BioWare has confirmed does not take place on Earth. We asked Anthem's executive producer Mark Darrah and lead producer Mike Gamble if you could jump on the Normandy, fly a few billion light years or so, and end up on the planet on which Anthem takes place. "We didn't design Anthem to be part of a BioWare continuum universe," Gamble says, but Darrah follows up with an answer that is not necessarily a no. "I would say that, the way the Anthem of Creation works means that connecting Anthem to other BioWare games is actually a lot easier than it was in the past." Gamble follows up adding more intrigue by saying, "It is actually, theoretically, in the I.P., possible to have the entire Mass Effect universe within a Shaper Storm," whatever that means.

Left Alive

A mission on a smaller front

We hadn't heard anything about Left Alive, the next entry in the long-dormant Front Mission series, since it was unveiled last year. With new director Toshifumi Nabeshima (previously director on the Armored Core series) and Metal Gear character designer Yoji Shinkawa, at the helm Left Alive may be more than a spinoff. Producer Shinji Hashimoto tells me that for now, this is where the series is headed. "We're putting all of our efforts into Left Alive at the moment," he says. "This is the direction of the series that we're going to take it in, as opposed to Front Mission."

Don't expect to pilot too many wanzer mechs in Left Alive, however, or even take turns during battle. Left Alive is a tactical third-person shooter that focuses on a smaller-scale conflict. Set in the year 2127, the story follows three distinct characters, making their way out of the city of Novo Slava – the center stage of a war. The journey cuts across each character's narrative as they separate and intersect.

No matter which character you're playing as, Left Alive is closer to The Last of Us than Gears of War on the shooter spectrum. Ammo is severely limited, and you can craft junk you find throughout each level into tools like smoke bombs or traps. This leads to more cautious encounters as you consider whether to stealthily knock out a group of guards one by one, or go for the sound and fury of a single grenade and hope it's enough to clear the room or give you time to approach one or two guards and knock them out.

The campaign takes place over the course of 24 hours, and players make decisions about how they choose to spend their time during a mission. Along with optional side objectives to rescue survivors, you also encounter some branching dialogue sequences. One scenario had me trying to convince an old man and his daughter to join our cause and escape the city. While the daughter joined without much coercing, the old man was wasn't having it, and decided to stay and hope for the best.

Of course, the Front Mission series has always been about giant robots, and Left Alive certainly has those. However, how you encounter them is slightly different. Although I was shown a snippet of gameplay in which you piloted a wanzer, most of your time will be spent outside them; you may have to avoid one as you make your way through Novo Slava, or have to take one out on-foot in a boss battle.

While the graphical style of the game certainly looks a little behind the times, it's interesting to see Square take Front Mission in such a different direction with Left Alive. Making the conflict more personal by focusing on the people who usually act as the bystanders of mech skirmishes holds promise. Hopefully, fans will take to the series' new direction when it launches later this year.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

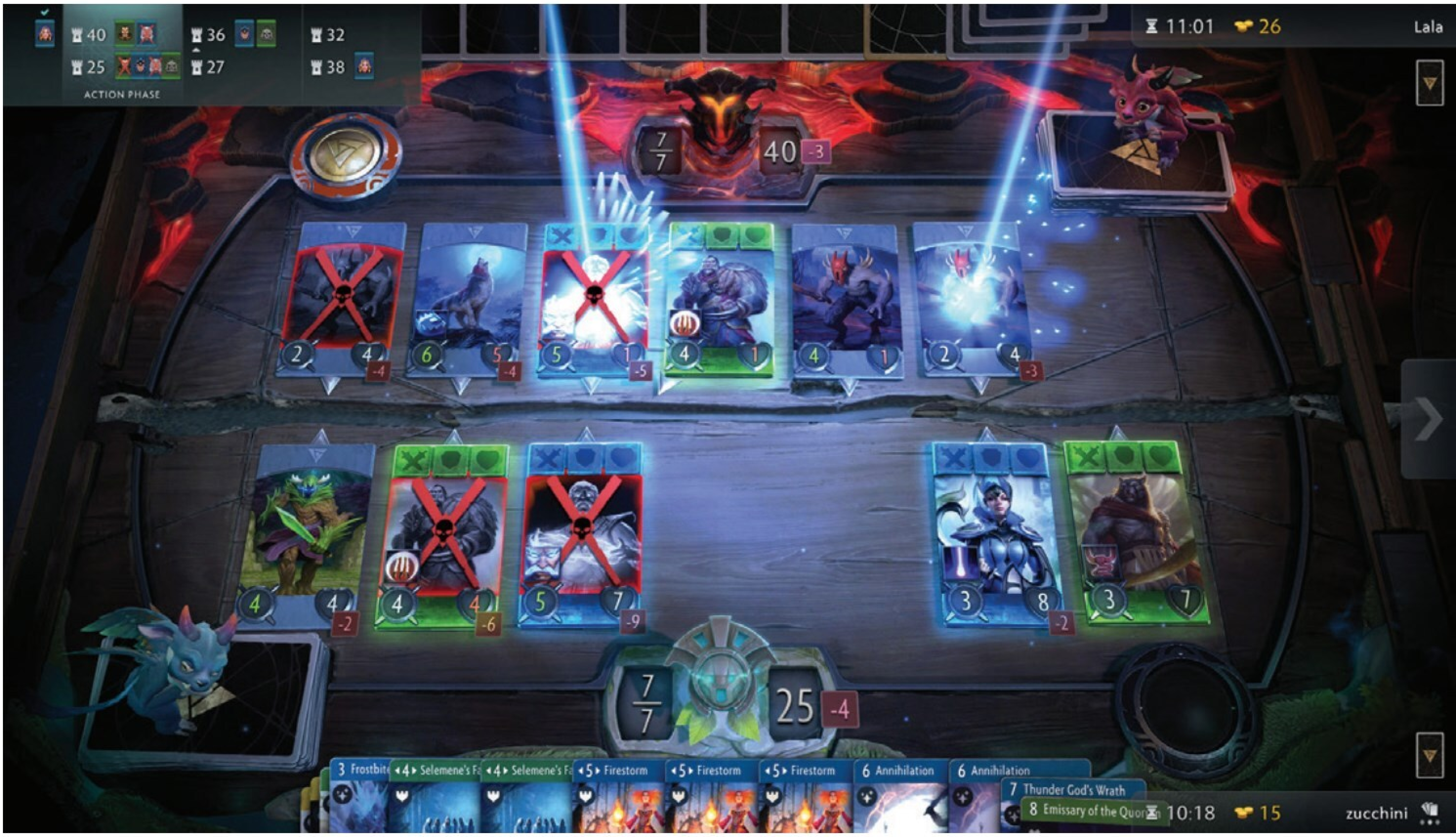
» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
2019



Artifact

Valve is back in the game

» **Platform**
PC • Mac
iOS • Android

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Valve

» **Developer**
Valve

» **Release**
November 28 (PC, Mac)
TBA (iOS, Android)

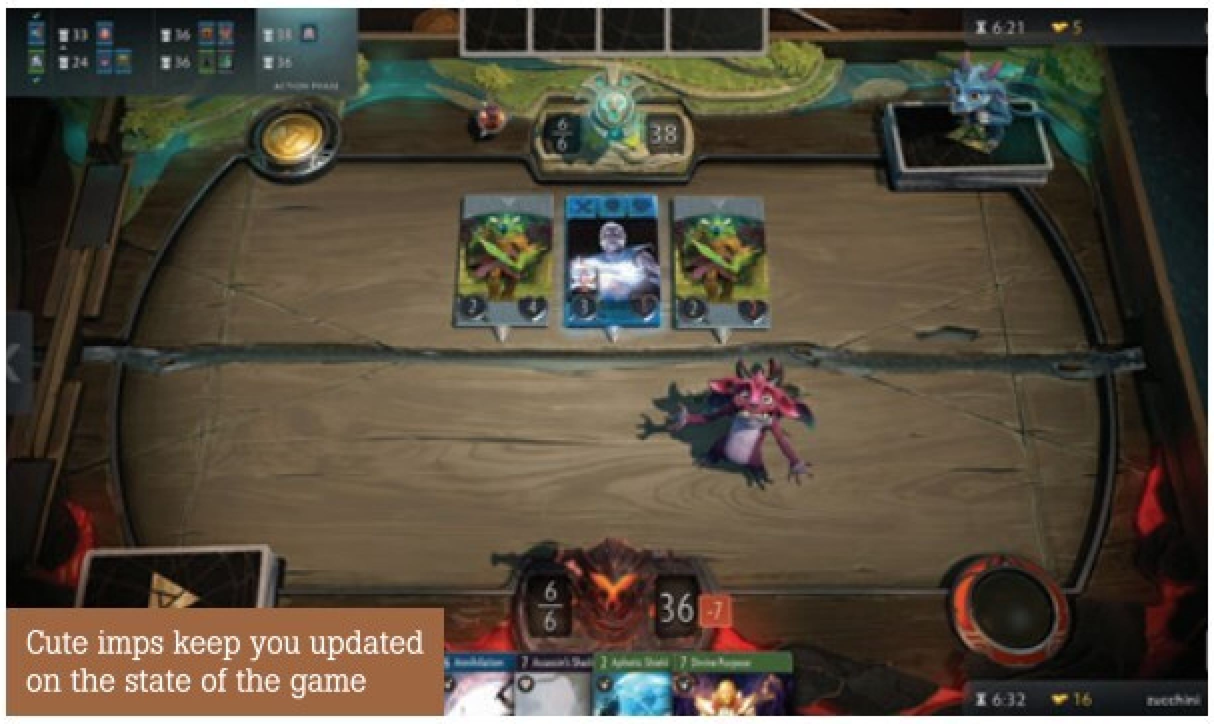
When Valve said it had something special to show during last year's International tournament, no one expected a Dota card game. Flash forward to this year, and the project headed up by legendary designer Richard Garfield (Magic: The Gathering) is ready to launch. While legions of Valve fans are hungry for Half-Life 3 or Left 4 Dead 3 (or any number of games with "3" in the title, really), Valve's foray into the digital card game space is a captivating and complex option that plays nothing like the deluge of games in the genre.

Sporting three different lanes and the colorful cast of characters from Dota 2, Artifact plays something like three games in one, where the player must win two of those games (or win one of them really hard, essentially). You manage a single hand across three lanes, each of which has its own resources to use. Powered by five heroes per deck, the action is surprisingly fast given just how many things are going on at once. Players take turns going back and forth until options are exhausted, seeking to destroy opposing towers in each lane with damage. Destroyed towers become ancients, which have twice the hit points of a standard tower, but if you want to go "all-in" on a lane and try to smash an ancient, that can win you the game.

After each round, players have the option to purchase additional gear from the shop using gold, a resource acquired primarily by defeating opposing heroes, though many cards allow you to boost your coffers. These modifications don't normally go away, so there's a sense of development over the course of a match as your heroes get stronger and stronger. Dead heroes return to the field after a few turns with all their modifications, so planning and positioning are important.

Heroes are important for other reasons beyond their equipment and abilities as well. Artifact features four colors of heroes and cards, and to play associated cards in a lane you need a hero of that color. You won't be able to play anything in lanes where you don't have a hero, so determining how to distribute your cast is of utmost importance. A lane where you have a blue and black character gives you more options, but leaving a lane unoccupied will force a hard pass and leave valuable resources on the table. Some cards can even be played on other lanes, so you may want to put a more vulnerable "caster" character in a safe place in order to lay down some support on your more active positions. Games are incredibly dynamic, and you need to constantly think about where to place your troops, your cards, and your equipment.

Artifact is poised to be more complex, competitive, and cerebral than other card battlers and digital CCGs on the market, and it is not a free-to-play title. Instead, players can buy the game (which comes with a smattering of packs) and then trade on the Steam market for cards they are looking for. After a few matches, I'm more than a little impressed, and incredibly eager to assemble my team and smash some ancients later this year. » **Daniel Tack**



Cute imps keep you updated on the state of the game

Remnant: Rise From Ashes

Dungeon-crawling at the end of the world

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Perfect World

» Developer
Gunfire Games

» Release
2019

At first glance, Remnant: Rise of Ashes shares a number of similarities with developer Gunfire Games' other current upcoming game, Darksiders III (which you can read about on page 60). Its real-world setting has undergone apocalyptic destruction at the hands of monsters, which means you are exploring the ruins of human society. Remnant, however, has humans fighting back for their homeland, and turns the end-of-the-world-scenario into a sort of survival-RPG shooter.

Playing as the ex-cultist class during a recent demo, it quickly becomes apparent Remnant's gameplay has more in common with Borderlands than it does Darksiders. As I work my way through the early dilapidated, monster-infested hallways, I'm immediately brought into a dungeon-crawling state of mind. That said, I can't exactly turn my brain off and mash the attack button against the endless hordes here; even the early monsters are tough, and ammo is scarce.

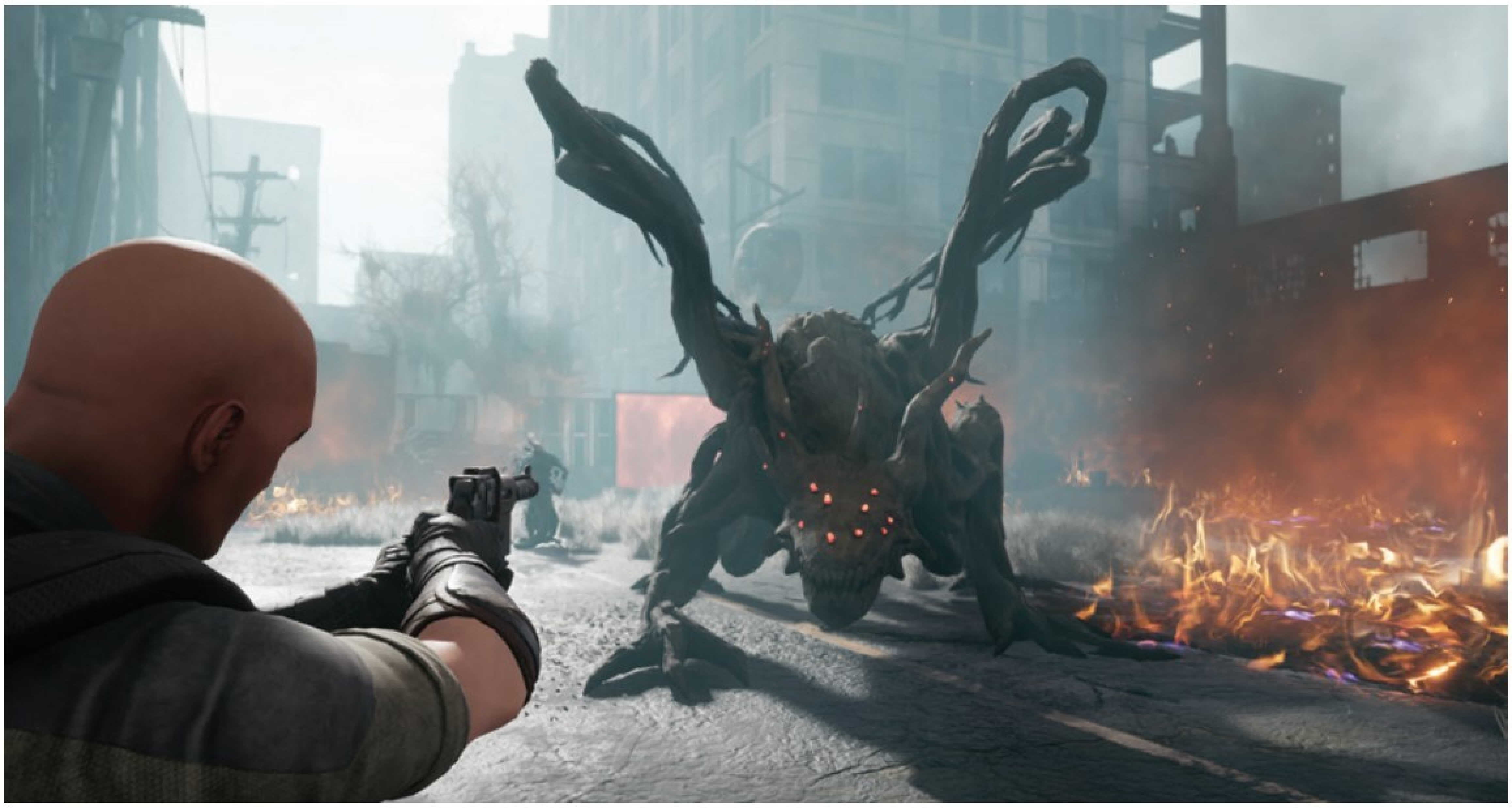
It helps that, having chosen the ex-cultist, I have a few extra tricks at my disposal. The most important is the ability to summon a few monsters of my own, which serves as a way to both damage and distract my foes as I lay into them with my guns, taking care to land headshots and deal critical damage.

This steady approach might be one players want to adapt, too. Though I wasn't able to tinker with it during my time, Gunfire bills Remnant as a survival game, complete with a base-building aspect wherein players can find allies out in the field, bring them back to their base, and help them out in exchange for resources they can use to keep themselves topped off or craft better gear.

Accompanying this is another way of extending Remnant's lifespan: procedurally generated worlds, which means you won't be facing the exact same challenge twice. This lends every outing into its world an air of uncertainty, and should make for some interesting return treks later on, assuming Gunfire Games can nail the endgame.

After working my way through some fodder monsters, I encounter an enormous, dragon-like creature amidst a square arena riddled with derelict buildings. The boss is no slouch, as I quickly learn the chest-high brick walls around me are only good cover for so long before the monster's fireballs tear through them. There are also several mobs to contend with, but my summoned monsters keep them at bay while I wail away at the boss' health. My victory is hard-fought, but it likely would have been an easier challenge to tackle with a group of four, as Remnant offers co-op play that lets you intermingle classes.

With a lack of co-op RPG shooters out there today, Remnant has some potential to attract players who just want to shoot some monsters with their friends. I wasn't able to key into the game's longform aspects such as survival and endgame content, but what I played felt solid. It could be exactly the kind of game to fill the shooting-and-looting void when it launches sometime next year. » **Suriel Vazquez**



One Piece: World Seeker

Exploring a new world of potential

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Bandai Namco Entertainment

» Developer
Ganbarion

» Release
2019

When Eiichiro Oda created the Japanese comic *One Piece* in 1997, it probably didn't occur to him that the license would become one of the biggest ever in Japanese entertainment. The story of the pirate crew led by Monkey D. Luffy has gotten bigger and bigger over time, but never quite caught on in North America as well as some other action comics, leaving publisher Bandai Namco pinning high hopes on One Piece: World Seeker to capture hearts and minds. Based on what I played, the newest One Piece game might just be able to do it.

One Piece: World Seeker is undoubtedly the most ambitious game the property has ever seen. While the Straw Hat pirates have found themselves in platformers, fighting games, and even within the Dynasty Warriors series, World Seeker marks the first time One Piece has gone open world. For a story that is about the freedom of exploration and the exhortation to find your own adventure, very little about the games until now has actually reinforced that theme.

The story puts Luffy on a newly established prison island, where years of war over minerals have displaced the population and destroyed the land. The Marines, eternal nemeses of the pirates, have set up shop there to imprison the new young pirates dubbed the Worst Generation. After Luffy's chaotic display at Impel Down and Marineford, he is at the top of the World Government's most wanted list and has become their highest priority. The original story has actually been penned by Oda, the first time he has directly written for a video game, and he's also designing two original characters for the release.

Unable to take on the entire navy by himself, Luffy must resort to a stealthier approach. Sneaking up on guards knocks them out, but Luffy can also go for headshots using his stretchable fist, firing it off like a gun. In this way, the game resembles a high-tension stealth game more than it does the typical action of previous One Piece titles, having Luffy move forward as he takes out threats. Cause enough chaos and robotic Pacifistas guards come out to subdue Luffy. They can be defeated, but it certainly isn't easy.

At the top of the prison island sits Akainu, the commander that killed Luffy's older brother. Defeating him has shades of complexity from Metal Gear Solid bosses, as a straight fist fight will get Luffy into a damage race with Akainu's lava that he is unlikely to win. Instead, proper use of headshots accompanied with using Luffy's haki, or more spiritual powers, is the key to victory.

One Piece: World Seeker has a long way to go before it is as good as the games it's taking inspiration from, including several open-world stealth mechanics that directly emulate Metal Gear Solid V. They say that imitation is the highest form of flattery, and Ganbarion has a strong start to the ideas it's exploring here. Hopefully this game can be to One Piece what Dragon Ball FighterZ is to its own source material. » **Imran Khan**

Torchlight Frontiers

Streamlined monster mashing

There's no shortage of Diablo-style ARPGs in the world today, but the Torchlight series holds a special place in the hearts of many for whacking monsters, upgrading loot, and dungeon delving. Echtra is ushering in a new, multiplayer-centric era for the heralded series with Torchlight Frontiers, featuring bustling towns, crafting, 8-player zones, and 4-player dungeons, on top of the traditional solo experience.

Torchlight Frontiers does away with the issue of stats and leveling. While gear still provides big bonuses in terms of character power, you'll never have to wonder about "core stats" like vitality, dexterity, and strength – it all comes down to raw HP, damage, and easy-to-understand bonuses. Without a leveling system, zones are instead divvyed up by item-level, so you know easily which area you should be tackling with any set of gear. You're still going to be upgrading and selecting which skills and items are best, but the guesswork and number-crunching to min-max your character are gone.

At a demo during PAX West, I played as the Forged class – a hefty, tanky bot that loves company. Utilizing a heat-based system, I accumulate heat fast by blasting goblins with my torso-mounted turret, which I then expel to execute a potent area-of-effect blast, annihilating everything around me. Each class is expected to have unique resource balancing like the heat mechanic, and it's pretty satisfying going from chest to chest, camp to camp, blowing away foes and upgrading loot. As I play, day turns to night, and the goblins are replaced by undead creatures – more difficult, but with better rewards. As I roam, I'm also collecting raw materials like rocks and branches from trees and outcrops that dot the landscape, which I can use to craft potent new items and outlevel the zone as I prepare to dive into dungeons that contain bosses and new areas.

My first dungeon dive unsurprisingly pits me against a large goblin. The boss comes with an unending stream of allies and a gigantic shield, which serves double duty as defense and a powerful charging offensive. Keeping my distance, I whittle down the massive health bar but eventually capitulate to a powerful charge – this particular fight is more about dodging the boss monster's massive, telegraphed attacks than attempting an all-out assault. I'm sent back to a checkpoint to lick my wounds, assess my gear, and try again.

It's a bite-sized slice of what speaks to a much larger game, a slick iteration of the popular hack'n'slash franchise that's been on the backburner for many years. I'm excited to get back in and try new classes, combos, and teamplay when Torchlight Frontiers heads into some form of beta on PC this year, with a console release coming next year. » **Daniel Tack**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Multiplayer Action/Role-Playing

» Publisher
Perfect World Entertainment

» Developer
Echtra Games

» Release
TBA

Blacksad: Under The Skin

Indulge your animal instincts

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC • Mac

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Microïds

» Developer
Pendulo Studios

» Release
2019

After an unassuming boxing-club owner named Joe Dunn is found hanging from the rafters of his own gym, his daughter hires a private investigator to get to the bottom of the homicide. Dunn's protégé and prized boxer have disappeared from the face of the earth, but the biggest fight of his career is right around the corner. In order to solve this strange homicide and find the missing boxer, P.I. John Blacksad will have to safely navigate New York's seedy underbelly.

Blacksad isn't well-known in the states, but this gorgeous Spanish comic series explores a version of 1950s Americana that is populated entirely by anthropamorphic animals. John Blacksad is a hardboiled private investigator who also happens to be a black cat. The comic has seen five different series since 2000, and now Pendulo Studios is working closely with the comic's creators on a game that stands as the sixth official story arc in the Blacksad universe.

Since the mid-'90s, Pendulo Studios has produced a number of point-and-click adventure games, but for Under the Skin, the team is taking a cue from Telltale's brand of adventuring. Blacksad will travel across a version of 1950's New York as he collects clues, interviews witnesses, gets into QTE fistfights, and ultimately hunts down Dunn's missing boxer.

During a brief demo, I watched Blacksad break into the boxer's apartment to look for clues. Since Blacksad is a cat, he can use his heightened senses to scan the room for details others might miss. Points of interest are highlighted anytime players activate Blacksad's senses, and these discoveries can open up new dialogue options. I witness this firsthand when Blacksad is accosted by two thugs. Even during dialogue exchanges, players can use Blacksad's powers of perception to scan the room. In this instance, Blacksad notices that one of his attackers is wearing an Irish pin, which opens up a new conversation chain that gives our detective added information about these goons' boss.

Blacksad isn't doing anything novel gameplay-wise, but it should appeal to fans of pulpy detective novels. The comic series won two Eisner Awards for its gritty anthropomorphic world; hopefully the game will tap into some of that magic. Blacksad's action might feel well-worn, but unlike episodic series we won't have to wait a month between episodes, since Under the Skin will launch as a complete standalone story sometime in 2019.

» Ben Reeves

11-11: Memories Retold

A different kind of war story

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Bandai Namco Entertainment

» Developer
Aardman Animations, DigixArt

» Release
November 9

From historical battles to modern combat to laser-spewing shootouts in space, war is omnipresent in video games. Yet despite the medium's obsession with armed conflict, the lives and stories of soldiers are rarely given precedence over action in the games we play. 11-11: Memories Retold aims to change this by viewing World War I from the perspective of two soldiers on opposing sides of the conflict.

It doesn't take more than a glimpse to realize that Memories Retold isn't your typical war game. The narrative adventure is presented through a heavily stylized visual filter, meant to evoke the work of painters like Claude Monet and J.M.W. Turner. The warm colors and soft focus also speak to the nature of memory, as the two protagonists reflect on – and narrate – the events that led them into the war.

Harry's story begins at a photography studio in Toronto. As Harry tries in vain to take a serious portrait of his playful co-worker Julia, she asks why he always tests the cameras by taking photos of her. Harry's narration, performed by Elijah Wood, hints at the answer; while the two have been lifelong friends, his feelings for Julia are more than platonic – and quite possibly unrequited. When a British Major shows up looking for someone to serve as his war photographer, Harry jumps at the offer. Not only would he be helping his country and return a war hero, but as Major Barrett says, ladies love a man in uniform.

As Harry's sequence plays out, the game periodically cuts to Kurt, a technician working in a zeppelin factory in Germany. Kurt's reasons for joining the war are very different. After fixing the factory's radio just in time to tune into the daily war report, Kurt learns that his son's entire unit has gone missing and is presumed dead. As he helps assemble the massive skeleton of a zeppelin, Kurt narrates a letter to his wife Katrin. Unlike the other men in the village, he can't simply wait and pray that his child is alright. He will join the army and search for his son himself.

Despite their differing motives, neither man has any interest in killing, a fact driven home in the ensuing war scene. Harry's job is to take heroic-looking pictures of Major Barrett as they charge the battlefield, which is awash in dark red hues and the exaggerated yellow streaks of gunfire. Kurt, who is embedded in the earthy-brown trenches on the other side of the field, is tasked with fixing a supply lift in the tunnels. Once again, gameplay jumps between the two men as they draw nearer, eventually coming face to face in an abandoned tunnel. Isolated from their fellow soldiers and facing the enemy for the first time, they hesitate. Kurt lowers his weapon, as the two narrators reflect on that pivotal event in their memories. Seconds later, the tunnel collapses, and Harry leaps to save Kurt just as the screen cuts to black.

Despite its modest production values, 11-11: Memories Retold sports an ambitious goal: to not treat World War I as window dressing for another action-packed shooter, but rather to consider and humanize the soldiers that gamers would normally gun down without a second thought. We'll find out how memorable Harry and Kurt's stories are when the game launches next month. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

DigixArt co-foudner Yan Fanise was the creative director on another WWI-based narrative game, Valiant Hearts: The Great War

Scum

Survival most meticulous

» Platform
PC

» Style
64-Player
Online Action

» Publisher
Devolver Digital

» Developer
Croteam, Gamepires

» Release
2019

The gaming world is filled with gritty Early Access titles built around throwing a huge number of people onto a piece of land and having them fight the wilds and other players in a bid for survival. Still, even in this crowded sea, Scum has more than enough quirkiness and thrills to stand out from the pack. Taking more than a tad of inspiration from *The Running Man* and *Battle Royale*, you spawn onto Scum island as a prisoner with an explosive drilled in your head. Your job is to survive long enough to get it removed. Did we mention you're being televised for all the world to watch?

For the systems aficionados out there, this survival game could be heaven. From the get go, you're messing with sliders in the character-creation option like your age, which affects your body mass and what you're good at right out of the game. Skills are pretty standard fare – running, stealth, sniping – but the actual moment-by-moment gameplay is fascinating.

In Scum, survival means more than just hiding in a bathtub, blowing away whoever comes by. You'll have to manage caloric intake by munching on stale cereal you find in dilapidated houses (or cooking) in order to maintain physical strength or keep your rifle from wobbling when you're sniping. You also have to answer the call of nature in a surprisingly detailed animation that might turn more than a few stomachs. Scum only gets more detailed from there, with players able to get sick from being caught in bad weather or getting bitten by the various animals that roam the island. Swimming with clothes that are too heavy will cause you to sink. There are even inventory pockets connected to whatever outfits you assemble for your prisoner to wear.

According to the developers, there is a story in the game but you can ignore it completely if you want, choosing to survive simply for earning admiration from watchers and mastering this incredibly complex game of survival management. Plan to camp out and keep an eye on charts and graphs related to your character's condition, like healing speed and bladder volume, more often than you're getting in gunfights in the forest. However, that's what makes Scum so interesting: It's truly a survival game in the purest sense of the word. Sure there's the typical run and gun of the battle royale genre, but this stats-managing game makes the world itself feel immediately more dangerous and a place you inhabit, with all of the awkwardness of the human body there for you to deal with.

Scum is still an Early Access title with a fair amount of bugs and performance issues. However, the game's foundation has immense promise, with a growing community of watchers becoming enthralled by its charms and complexity. It's also gorgeous to look at, assuming you have a powerful enough PC to run the thing. In the months to come, it will be interesting to watch how Scum (and its audience) evolves. With its hardcore simulation aspects and rickety charm, we could be looking at the next Twitch phenomenon. **» Javy Gwaltney**

The 13th Doll

Toying with nostalgia

In the early '90s, Trilobyte created The 7th Guest, a horror puzzle game full of cheesy-but-endearing live-action FMV. The project was an unprecedented success. The 7th Guest was one of the first games to take advantage of CD-ROM technology, and is often credited as a driving force behind the adoption of CD drives. Trilobyte made one official sequel, The 11th Hour, before it was quietly disbanded in 1998. Now, more than 20 years later, a group of dedicated fans are hoping to resurrect this beloved franchise for the modern era.

Trilobyte's original games told the story of an eccentric dollmaker named Henry Stauf who made a deal with the devil that required the sacrifice of several young souls. The 13th Doll continues this sad story. Players climb into the tormented mind of the young boy named Tad who defeated Stauf in the original game as he takes a trip back to the Stauf mansion seeking catharsis. Instead, Tad discovers another horrifying mystery and more mind-bending puzzles.

We played through a handful of the game's 26 puzzles, which feature a good mix of themes. In one puzzle, we moved black and white chess knights across a miniature chessboard using only legal chess moves. In another, we rewired an old-timey telephone, being careful not to cross any wires. Like the original Trilobyte games, The 13th Doll's headscratchers are more challenging than they initially seem and require a bit of trial-and-error. But the puzzles we completed were highly rewarding, and a new hint system is ready to help anyone who gets stuck.

The 13th Doll began as a simple fan project, but evolved into something more. In 2015, Attic Door Productions launched a successful Kickstarter that allowed the team to officially license The 7th Guest franchise and rehire the original actor who played Henry Stauf. The 13th Doll even features a series of live-action cutscenes that are full of over-the-top horror camp. This fan project has been in the works for over a decade, but its long gestation will draw to a close early next year.

» **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Puzzle

» **Publisher**
Attic Door Productions

» **Developer**
Attic Door Productions

» **Release**
2019

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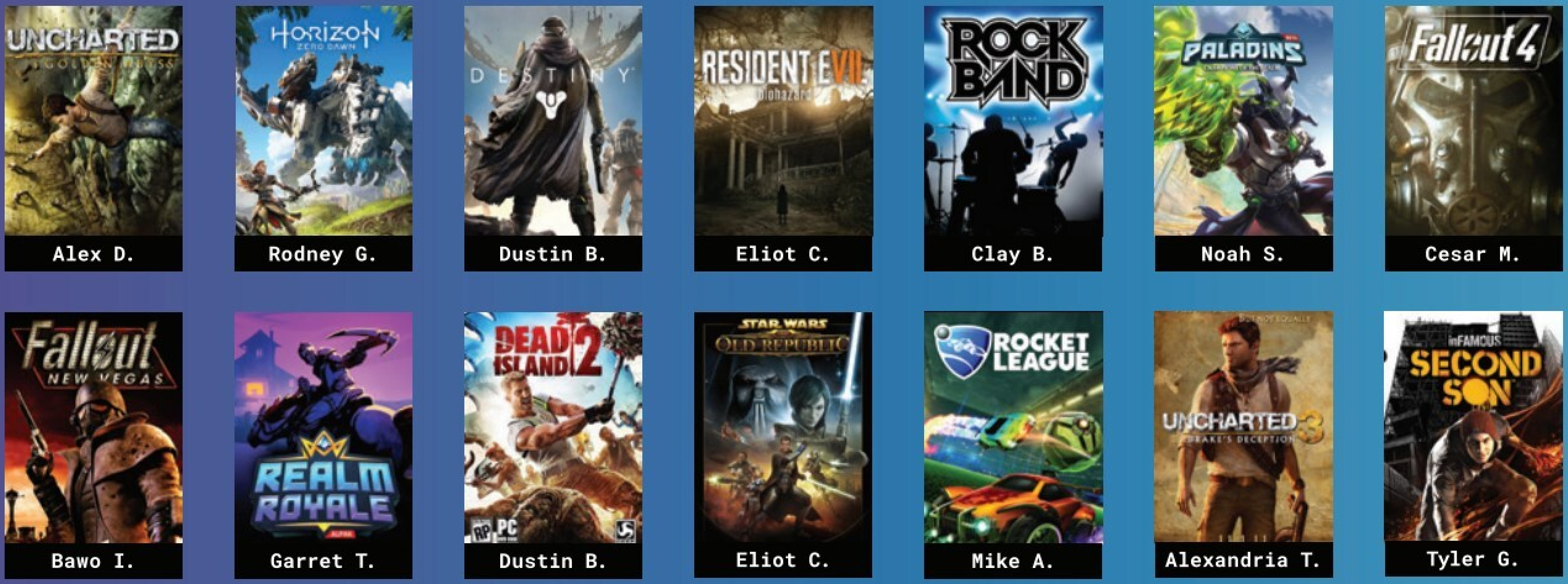

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ORBITAL
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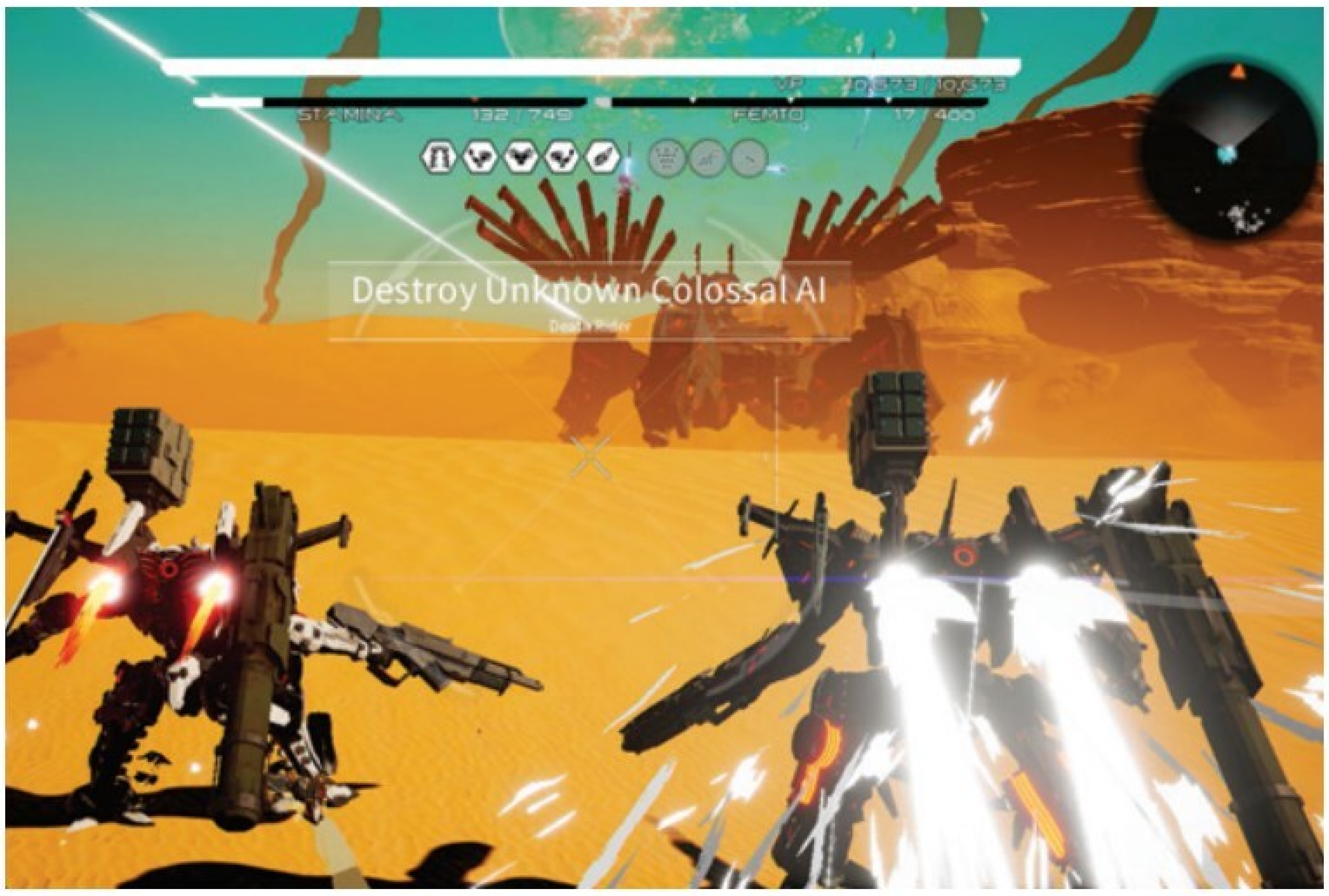
Daemon X Machina

Show your superiority in and out of your mecha

Nintendo has another intriguing Switch exclusive in Daemon X Machina. The mecha game features striking visuals and refreshingly fast action, as well as an enviable pedigree. Producer Kenchiro Tsukuda has spent years working on the Armored Core series, and he and his team are determined to advance the genre.

The relationship between the mecha (or "Arsenal," in DxM parlance) and the person who pilots it is one of the game's more interesting elements. Players can eject from their Arsenal at will, continuing the battle on foot. At first, this seems like a terrible idea; enemy machines are plentiful, and more than a few of them are exponentially larger than your towering machine. Your hunch may very well prove correct. Initially, putting your boots on the ground is best reserved as a last-ditch attempt to escape before a locked-on missile tears through your cockpit. Over time, your character's skills can improve, and those advancements carry over into your Arsenal. "For example, if my player character becomes skilled with a sword, that skill will transfer over so that when he's inside the mecha he'll be able to use swords in his mecha as well," Tsukuda says.

Your character is a mercenary, so his or her relationship with the Arsenal is critical. That doesn't mean you can't do sneaky things like drop it in a prominent location, hop out, and use it as bait to lure unsuspecting enemies closer, however. Once you have the drop on them, your merc can attack with weapons including a drone turret or those aforementioned swords. Players who spend time leveling up their character can even perform superhuman feats such as picking up tank-like vehicles and hurling them at other enemies.



Bear in mind, you're no slouch inside your Arsenal, either. These mecha are fast and capable of flight, making battles feel desperate and immediate as opposed to plodding duels between barely mobile weapons platforms. Observant players can scour the ruined cities and other battlefields for new deployable weapons, though you'll have to fight for the really good stuff. Bosses can be harvested for their powerful gear, but getting it won't be simple. "Parts of the boss might come off as you're fighting them, and if that's a weapon, you can get it and you can use it," Tsukuda says. "But if something comes off and you destroy it, you won't be able to get it, so that's something you'll need to pay attention to."

Daemon X Machina looks to offer exciting combat both in and out of your giant robot. Hopefully, mecha fans won't have to wait until the end of 2019 to get their hands on this one.
» **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Marvelous

» **Release**
2019

Trover Saves The Universe

What did I just play?

» Platform
PSVR • PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Squanch Games

» Developer
Squanch Games

» Release
2019

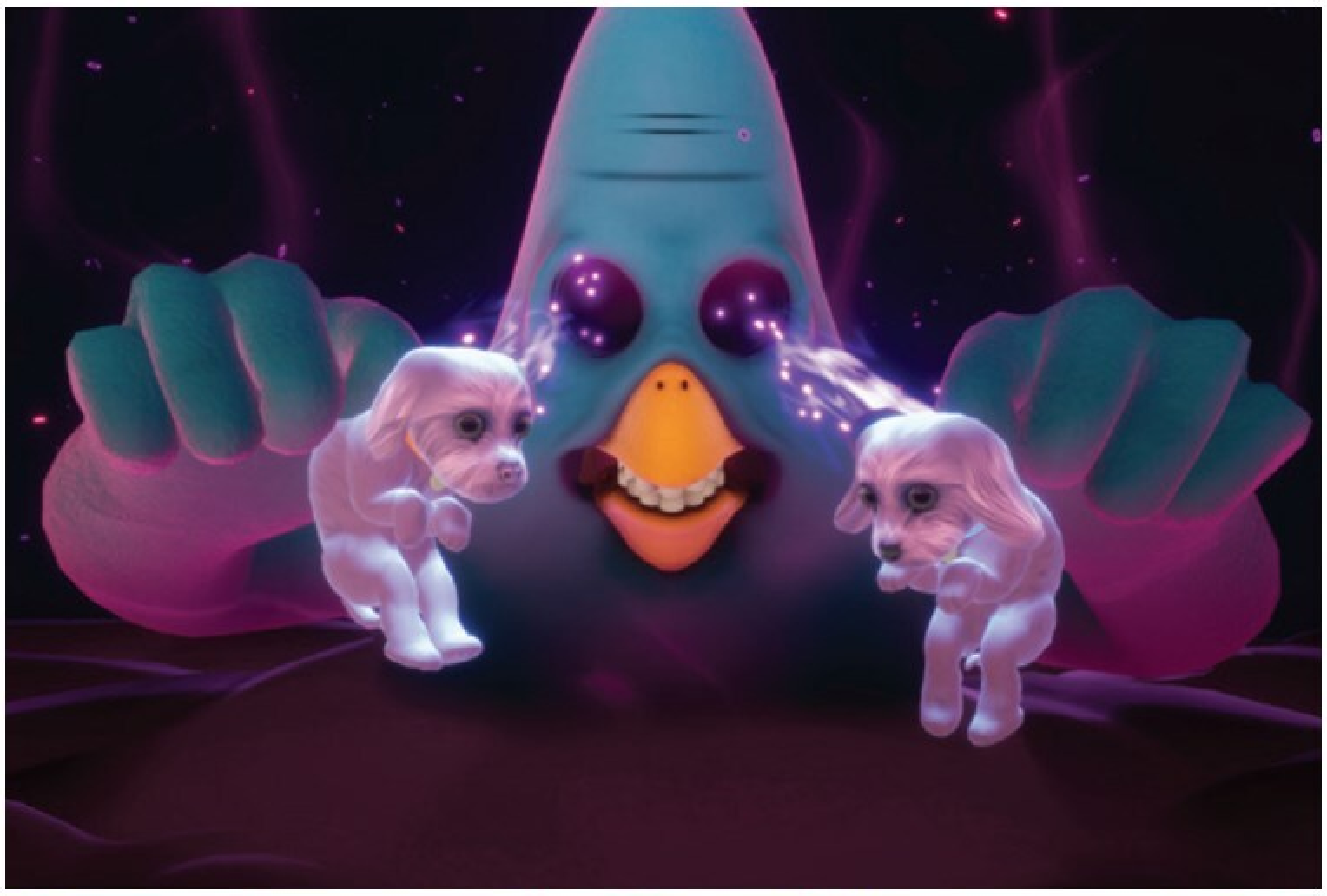
From the mind of Justin Roiland, the co-creator and voices of both Rick and Morty, Trover Saves the Universe is a funny, bizarre, third-person/first-person single-player co-op adventure. You trek through the world of Chairopia on a quest to save two Maltese dogs who have been stolen by an all-seeing gigantic beaked creature. It's weird.

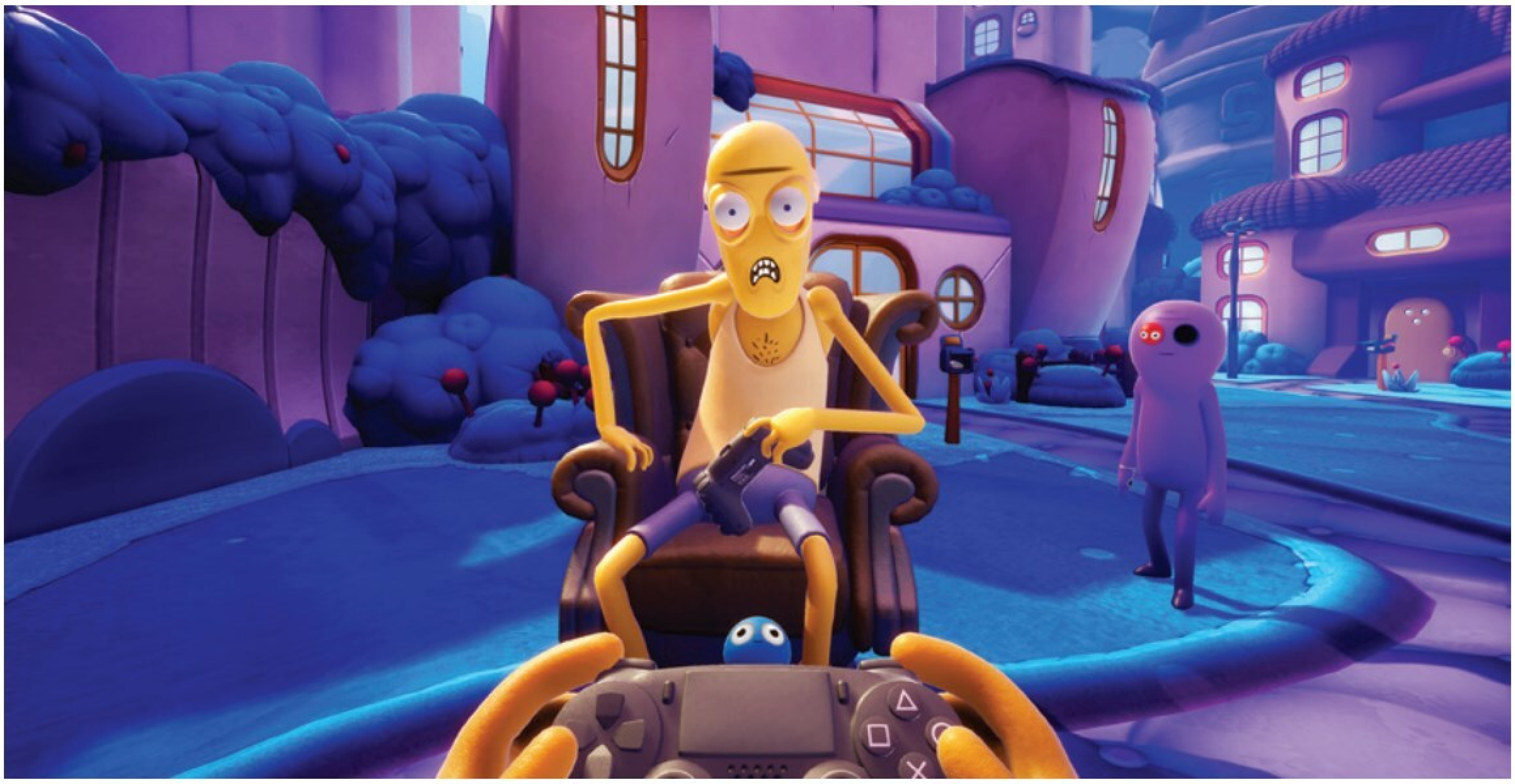
You play as the Chairopian whose dogs were stolen from the first-person perspective. When you meet Trover, the titular purple character who can jump and smack enemies around with a beam sword, he gives you a Power Baby that lets you take full control of him. So, seeing through the Chairopian's eyes, you control Trover as if it were a third-person action game. In this way, you technically control two characters. You inhabit the Chairopian, who sits in a mobile chair that moves through the world, and they have full control over Trover's movements. The game was developed as a VR title from the beginning, but it can be fully played outside of VR. Owning a copy of the game lets you play it however you choose.

I spoke with Roiland after playing the first few minutes and he laughed with understanding at my first question: What did I just play? Roiland is jovial and relaxed and rarely says anything without adding expletives and a punchline to the end, but it's clear he takes the story and world of Trover very seriously. "I've thought a lot about, what is Trover? And what type of creature he is," Roiland says. "Trover is an eyehole monster, which is a parasitic form of life. He derives abilities from the power babies that are plugged into his eyes – just like the villain you are tracking down to hopefully defeat." Roiland comes from the world of animated comedy television, both as a performer and a writer, so it's not surprising to learn, as weird as it is, that Trover's world and story are fully realized.

Along with discussing Trover with Roiland, we also talked about the concept of making funny video games. Tanya Watson co-founded Squanch Games with Roiland and has a history with Epic Games working on titles like Bulletstorm and Fortnite, among others. We asked Watson why funny video games are rare. "There are two answers to this: One is iterating a lot is expensive, and when we're developing games, comedy is hard to get to because it takes a lot of iteration," Watson says. "If you have to do it a lot over and over again, it's hard to get there because it costs so much time, it costs so much money, and I feel like even if you are trying to make a comedy game, you just can't quite get there." Roiland also pointed out that funny people usually pursue different entertainment avenues – stand-up comedy, writing television, etc. – and the path to get involved with video games isn't always clear. "The steps it would take for me to get there are like, "F--- that!" But now that I am here, because of my VR passion, let's just make some crazy-ass games, man," Roiland says.

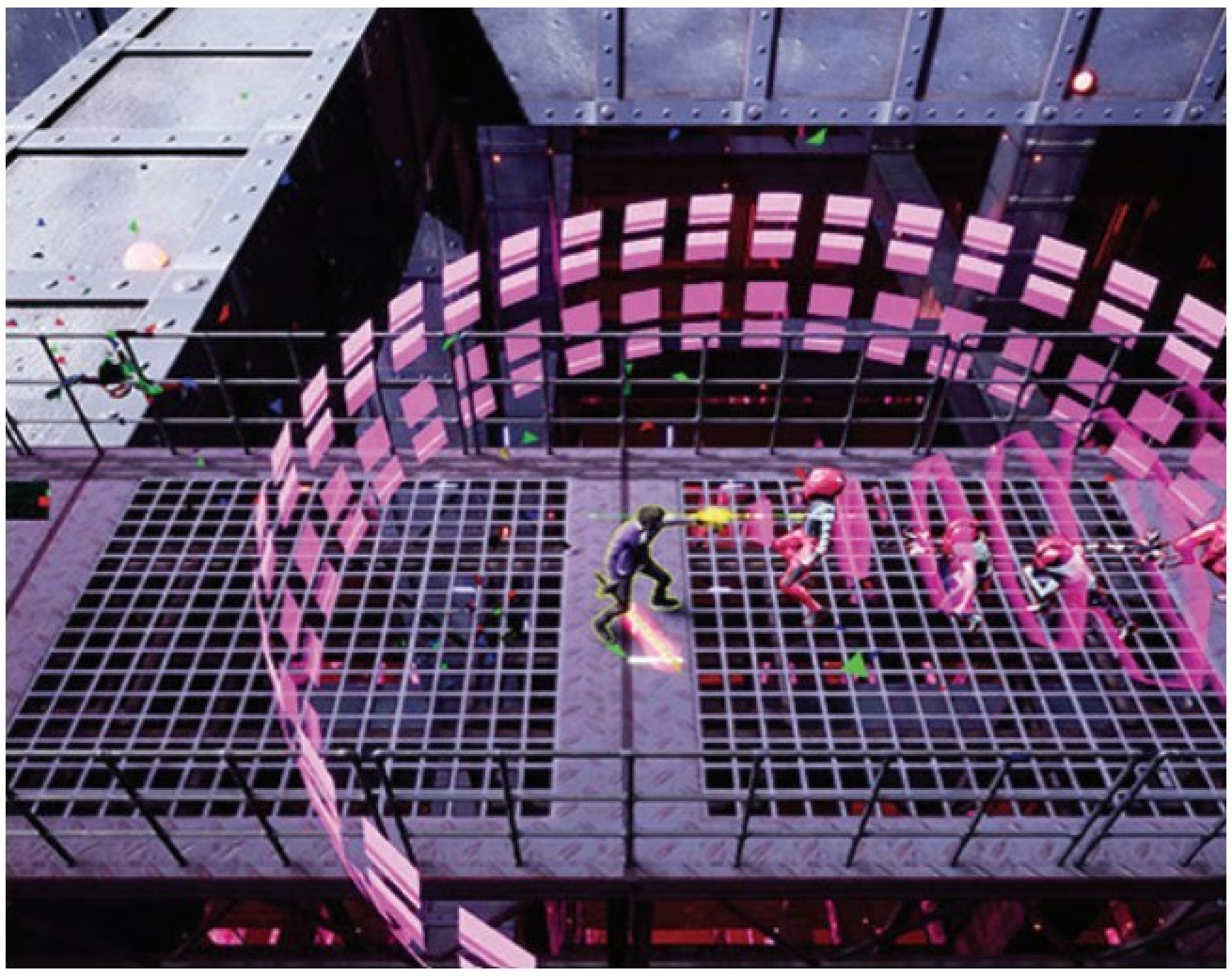
Our time with Trover was confusing, but in an intriguing way. Roiland's signature, funny, improvisational style of performance was on display in almost every character interaction, and it makes us excited to see how the full story will pan out. » **Kyle Hilliard**





Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes

Indie feel and punk rock overtones



After years away from the director's chair, Goichi Suda (better known for his pseudonym, Suda51) has returned to the canvas fabric seat to helm a new game, his first since the original No More Heroes a decade ago. Sitting down and playing Travis Strikes Again, however, serves as a strong reminder that you never know what to expect from Suda51, and you almost never know whether that's a good thing.

Travis Strikes Again, the third game in the No More Heroes universe, but one that is explicitly not No More Heroes 3, is as strange and enigmatic as Suda himself. In the same way Suda's punk rock-aesthetic and wrestling-obsessed conversational style belie the genuinely nice guy underneath, Travis Strikes Again seems almost reticent to give away most of its secrets. You only see what the game wants you to see while a mounting pile of promises and potential hides behind its early gates.

Unlike its predecessors, Travis Strikes Again is not a behind-the-back single-player action game. Intrigued by the Switch's joy-cons, Suda directed his team to make a co-op brawler starring Travis Touchdown and Badman, father of Badgirl from the first game, out to seek revenge for his daughter's death. The two get sucked into a video game and, while there's promises of shifting gameplay styles, Suda is mostly keeping that information under lock and key. The demoed level was a top-down brawler that had Travis and Badman traverse a virtual playground as the duo batted away dozens of minions surrounding them at every turn.

It is hard to say what to expect from Travis Strikes Again until we can get our hands on the full title, but we're hoping that its simple nature is also hiding something grander behind the scenes when it releases exclusively on the Switch in January. » **Imran Khan**

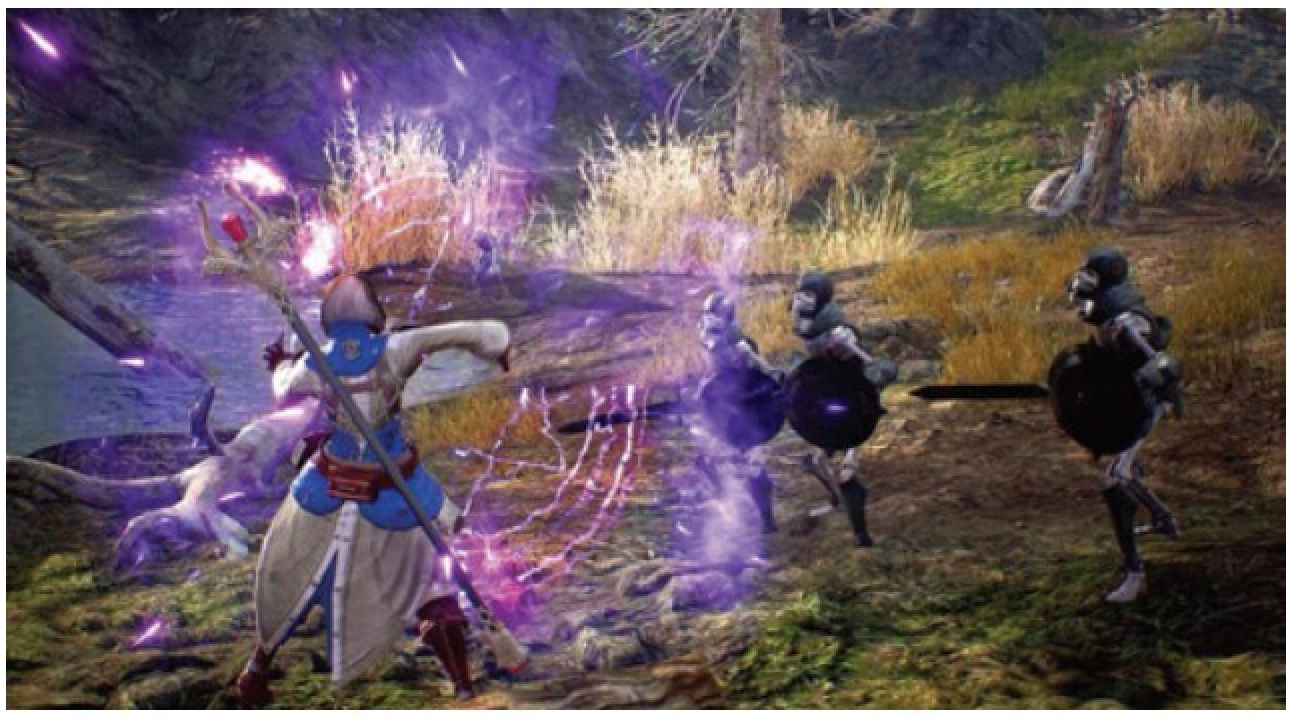
» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action

» Publisher
Grasshopper Manufacture

» Developer
Grasshopper Manufacture

» Release
January 18



Bless Unleashed

An active MMORPG takes on console

Since the tab-targeting MMORPG has fallen out of favor in the last decade (with a few longstanding, well-established exceptions), developers have sought to entice a new wave of MMO players with fast-paced action mechanics. Bless Unleashed presents a controller-savvy opportunity to capture all the looting, leveling, and special abilities of the MMORPG in a flashy wrapper that keeps players rolling, dodging, and positioning against a variety of enemies and bosses.

At PAX West, I played as two classes against a smattering of standard enemies and a big boss. Though the demo was toned down a bit to ensure I had a chance on my first try, the mechanics speak to modern action RPGs, involving a frenzied mix of damage and dodging. As the berserker, I move in to unleash heavy axe blows tinged with life leech, execute potent whirlwinds, and massive blows. As the archer, I keep my distance and let loose with charged attacks, arrow volleys, and tactical grenades.

With both characters, the signature demo battle is against a giant cyclops. Unlike the easy-to-beat enemies leading up to him, one error can spell disaster during this encounter, as the cyclops unleashes a deadly eye beam that can bring a health bar down from full to zero in a heartbeat. Chugging potions and rolling around like a maniac, I manage to beat the beast.

Bless Unleashed has a challenge ahead in a genre that sees no end of newcomers despite market saturation, but the focus on action is refreshing. I'm curious to see how the full game plays as it marches ahead toward release. » **Daniel Tack**

» Platform
Xbox One

» Style
Online Multiplayer Action

» Publisher
Bandai Namco Entertainment

» Developer
Round 8 Studio, Neowiz

» Release
TBA

reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

80 Destiny 2: Forsaken

After a strong launch followed by some long-tail problems, Destiny 2's Forsaken expansion is a do-or-die moment, and Bungie has done it. Forsaken offers a diverse, fun campaign with more personal stakes, an overhauled progression system, a great new multiplayer mode, and an evolving endgame. It may be harder for casual players to jump into the fray, but for diehard fans, Forsaken takes Destiny 2 to new heights.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Twitter.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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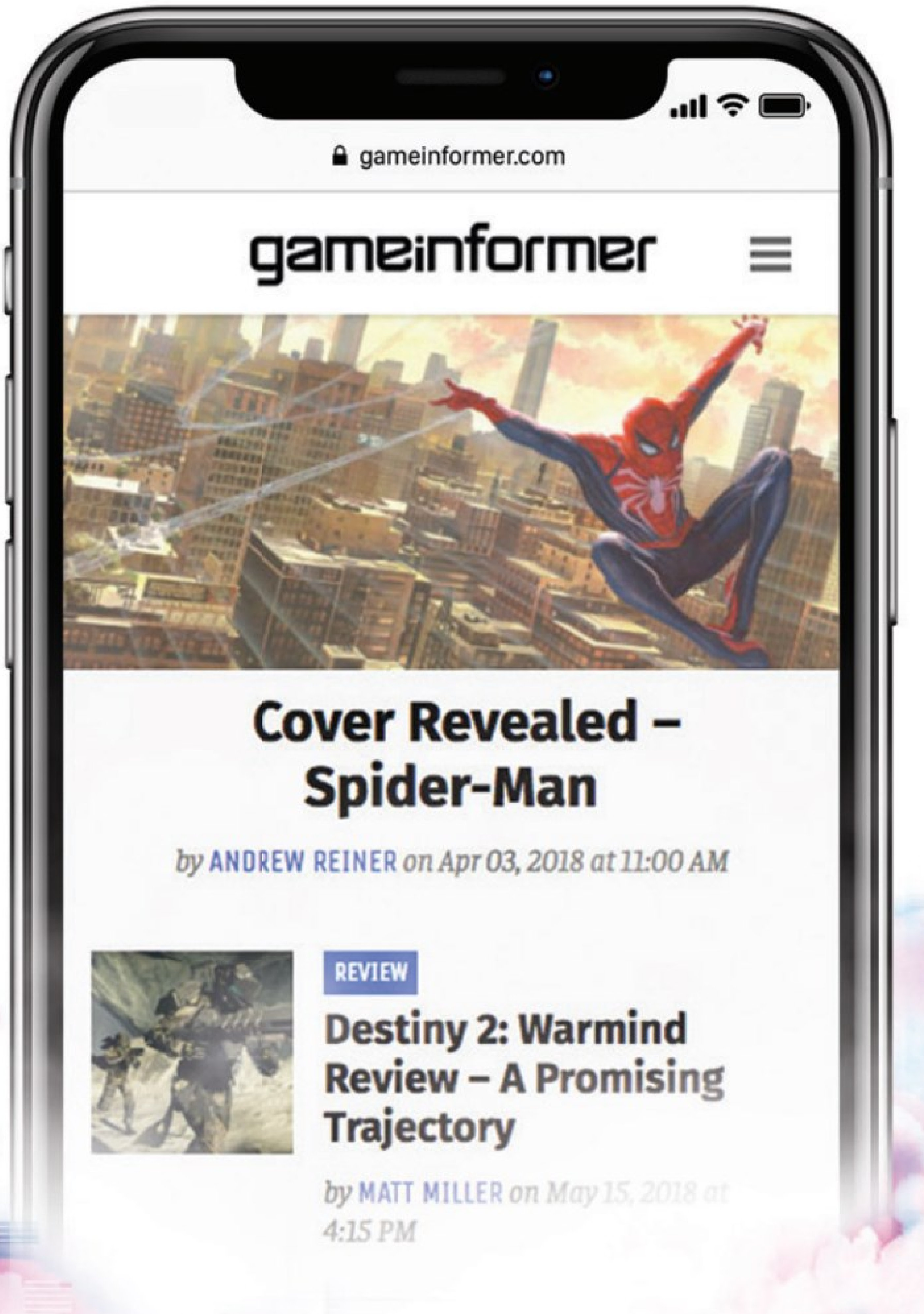

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Cover Revealed – Spider-Man

by ANDREW REINER on Apr 03, 2018 at 11:00 AM

REVIEW

Destiny 2: Warmind Review – A Promising Trajectory

by MATT MILLER on May 15, 2018 at 4:15 PM

The new gameinformer.com

Destiny 2: Forsaken

Embracing the hobby

9.25

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH
gameinformer GOLD

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Activision
Developer Bungie, High Moon Studios **Release** September 4 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Avenge your friend, then confront the evil behind the curtain in this sprawling expansion and reinvention of Destiny 2

» **Graphics**
Gorgeous environments (including excellent new strikes and lost sectors) are among the series' best. On console, frame stutters, menu load times, and other technical glitches have become an irksome problem

» **Sound**
A striking score opens with gritty Western overtones that allude to an untamed frontier, and gives way to the ethereal chorales of a magical sylvan hideaway

» **Playability**
With the bow joining the host of other fun weapons, Bungie once again proves its mastery over nuanced first-person combat

» **Entertainment**
An invigorating shot in the arm to the Destiny franchise, this jam-packed release is absorbing for hobbyist players, even as it sometimes sacrifices accessibility

» **Replay Value**
High

Ongoing games must constantly improve themselves to remain relevant. Destiny 2: Forsaken is a robust adventure characterized by darker themes, character-driven storytelling, and thoughtfully imagined missions, enemies, and locations. But it's also a reinvention of the franchise's core systems. Catering chiefly to dedicated players, Forsaken's lengthy grind, complex upgrade systems, and focus on the endgame doesn't invite engagement from newcomers. Accessibility may have taken a hit, but the resulting depth makes the franchise stronger than it has been in years.

Forsaken takes a hard turn from the quippy characters of the base game, opting instead for a story about grief and the way it drives us into questionable action. Our Guardian launches into a quest to mete out vengeance for the fallen Cayde-6, whose murder is a figurative death knell to Destiny's more frivolous narrative tendencies. The campaign dovetails into Petra's grief-fueled opening of a Pandora's Box, and the evils subsequently unleashed. In combination, it makes for the most sophisticated narrative in the series.

Several excellent story missions evoke a classic Western, and play out on the chaotic Tangled Shore destination. As you hunt down the members of a malicious criminal cadre, the level design helps each boss feel distinct, like the Mad Bomber's scattered explosives. These battles also showcase the aggressive Scorn enemy group. Their tactics are especially fun to confront when they arrive in mixed packs. The sneering Uldren is a great antagonist to wrap it all around; he's a character we love to hate, even as his motivations are sympathetic.

After the campaign, the pastoral mountains and dreamy mists of the Dreaming City make for some excellent exploration fodder. Dozens of secrets are a joy to discover with friends. The Blind Well wave-based arena is frantic and fun, but the absence of matchmaking is limiting. This endgame locale also hides an innovation that plays to Destiny's strength as a living game. The completion of the challenging Last Wish raid triggered a host of new activities across the area, with more to come in subsequent weeks. This sense of an evolving landscape should be the template for the series, setting players on a dynamic journey that responds to their actions.

The introduction of Gambit is a welcome mingling of cooperative and competitive play. Players battle waves of enemies, bank resources, and occasionally engage in tense asymmetrical showdowns with an overpowered enemy player. Gambit is thrilling and accessible thanks to a smart interface and dialogue that guides the action. I've encountered an unfortunate number of blowouts, but I'm often surprised when a losing team turns things around for a big comeback.

Forsaken also reworks several core systems. The new weapon slots offer flexibility and empowerment in equal measure and brings fun weapons like fusion rifles back into regular usage. Character power and weapon damage have been rebalanced, leading to a faster and more lethal Crucible, but one that is less friendly to novices. Power progression is slow but fair, with marked activities each day that can lead to character improvement. Random rolls on gear means greater investment in your rewards as you chase the perfect loadout. New bounties and quests are a blast to layer on top of one another, but it's frustrating to run back and forth between vendors.

Equipment infusion is too expensive, and the weapon mods are too hard to acquire. Likewise, new exotics are vanishingly rare to drop, and the current path to new super unlocks (after your first) hides behind high-level activities. All of this combines to limit the ability to experiment with playstyles or gear setups, and obscures much of the best equipment and variety so deep into the grind that many players may never encounter those experiences, which is a shame. Rewards should be meaningful, but the current model goes too far.

Forsaken introduces an excellent scheme for tracking in-game Triumphs and Collections that act as a trophy wall to your gathered treasures. The Triumphs supply dozens of tasks to chase across the game; I'm particularly delighted by the collectible lore tabs and the stories they tell. Equipment collections solve part of the problem of bloated inventory, but I'm bummed that most of the new Year 2 items can't be retrieved.

As a dedicated Destiny player, I'm gratified by the breadth of adventures in Forsaken, but I'm also aware that more casual players may miss out on a lot of the most compelling content. Even so, this release has the potential to draw lapsed Guardians back into the fold. Forsaken is deep, mysterious, and vast, three words that echo what players most want from this growing universe.

» **Matt Miller**

Mega Man 11

Graduated old school

game informer SILVER

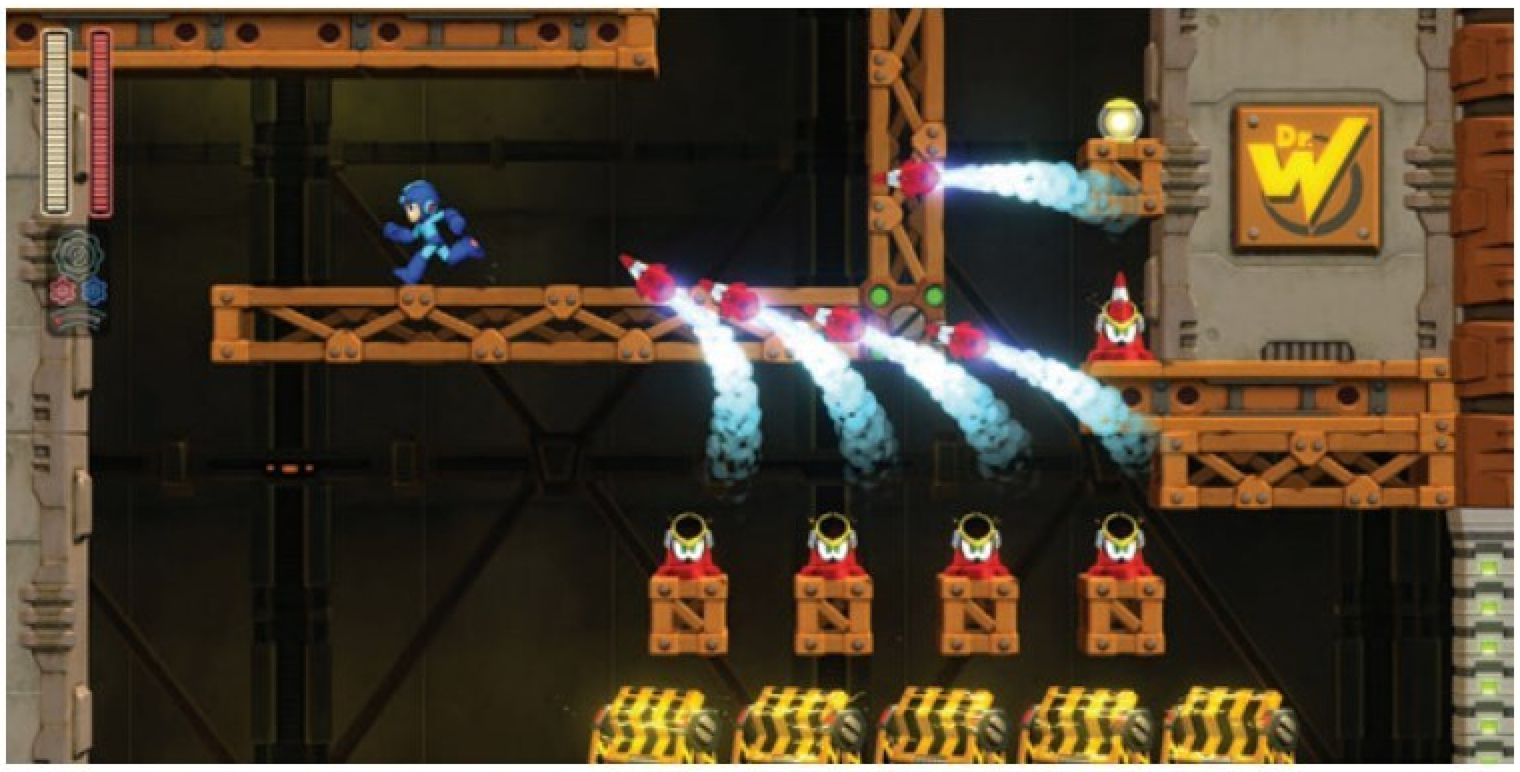
Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** October 2 **Rating** E10+

When Mega Man jumped onto the scene in 1987, it was like nothing else. Players could determine the order in which they took down all of Dr. Wily's evil robot masters and then steal their powers. After 30 years, that formula no longer feels novel, but Mega Man 11 proves that the classics are classic for a reason. Capcom has given the Blue Bomber a new coat of paint and a few new tricks, but Mega Man's core gameplay remains challenging and rewarding.

Among the things that never change is Dr. Wily's mad desire for power. Once again, he's kidnapped eight of Dr. Light's robots and reprogrammed them for evil. Robot masters are a highlight in any Mega Man game, and that remains true here; every boss has a unique gimmick that sets them apart stylistically, but their cute design is betrayed by their fearsome skills in battle. Every time I went toe-to-toe with one of these killer machines, it felt like an epic throw down. My heart raced as Block Man transformed into a two-story monstrosity who threw car-sized bricks, and my palms sweated as Acid Man sent waves of toxic sludge my way. Paying attention to your enemies' tells and mastering their attack patterns is half the fun, and taking each robot master down for the first time is an absolute thrill.

The creative design of each robot carries through in their stages. Bounce Man's level is my favorite, with bounce pads that send you ping-ponging around. I also loved falling across several screens before landing on a massive trampoline that shot me back into the sky. Other stages present memorable moments too, like outrunning a massive forest fire and bounding over icy platforms in the middle of a snowstorm. I never knew what to expect from each level, and their themes never overstayed their welcome.

The special weapons and abilities you earn are instrumental in overcoming each level's challenges. For example, Acid Man's acid barrier saved my skin more than once, and Impact Man's pile driver is a dash attack that is invaluable during certain platforming sequences. You can swap between all of these abilities using the right analog stick, which is incredibly slick and minimizes the time you spend in menus. By the end of the game, I felt like a powerhouse as I quickly cycled through my abilities, overcoming every challenge.



Even with all of these new toys, Mega Man's most powerful skill is available from the start. The gear system allows you to slow down time or amplify your gun for a short period. This is the biggest change to Mega Man's core gameplay in over 30 years, but it's a welcome addition. These new tools turned what could have been frustrating challenges into death-defying stunts. Nothing is more satisfying than using the slow-mo gear to bound through tricky obstacles, then sidling up to enemies to unload a few overpowered shots into their weak spots. Overusing the gear system makes Mega Man overheat, so balancing these powers takes skill – but that only ratchets up the tension as the action intensifies.

Mega Man's new tricks are even more important because Capcom didn't pull any punches in terms of difficulty, but old-school challenge feels like a fair fight thanks to precise controls. Four different difficulty modes allow everyone to find a comfortable playthrough, but I had the most fun on the normal setting. The shop system also lets you tune your experience. You get to keep all the bolts you earn when you die, and these are used to purchase extra lives, energy refills, and permanent upgrades like larger buster shots and better traction on ice. So even when I crashed and burned during a boss fight, I never felt like all was lost.

Mega Man 9 and 10 were both loving throwbacks to the franchise's NES roots, but Mega Man 11 is the first entry in ages that offers something new without sacrificing everything fans love. The new gear system is a cool mechanic, and Capcom's level design feels classic in all the right ways. Mega Man 11 taps into the series' past, but also serves as a solid foundation for the Blue Bomber's next 30 years.

» **Ben Reeves**

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Concept**
Update Mega Man's formula for the modern era with a new mechanic that tweaks the action without sacrificing the elements fans love

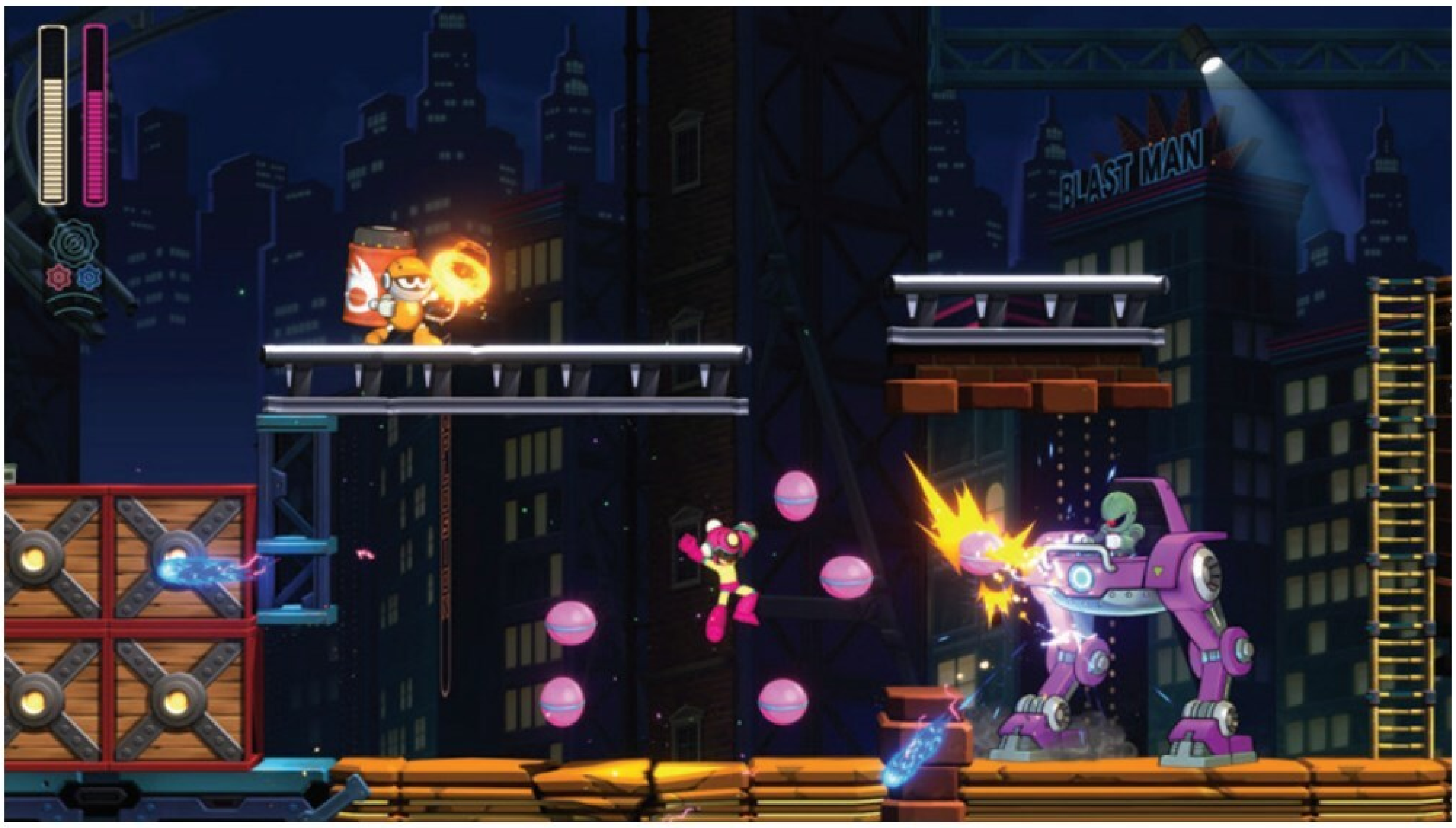
» **Graphics**
The new look is crisp and bright, but doesn't set itself apart in today's diverse landscape of stunning 2D sidescrollers

» **Sound**
This mix of classic NES-era riffs have been amped up thanks to modern synthesizers, and even the new tunes are memorable

» **Playability**
Each level features its own creative challenges, but the controls are so tight that I enjoyed overcoming every obstacle

» **Entertainment**
This Mega Man looks modern, but it offers a classic Mega Man challenge. Thankfully, four difficulty settings and a range of upgrades help ease in all types of players

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



NBA Live 19

Still searching for its shot

7

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** September 7 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Continue the rebuild process for a basketball sim still searching for its identity

» **Graphics**
Player models look improved from last year, as do animations, but you can't break out of many of them

» **Sound**
New booth team Ed Cohen and Jay Williams deliver flat, context-free commentary

» **Playability**
The off-ball mechanics add dimension to a game with strong defense and dribbling controls, but animation lag makes the movement and passing feel unresponsive

» **Entertainment**
Live does its best work away from the NBA license, when it delves in to fantasy hoops scenarios. The NBA-focused modes still need a lot more work

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

After nearly a decade of struggling to find its game, last year EA Sports finally found a promising centerpiece to build its NBA Live series around. The create-a-player mode, The One, gave hoop heads a one-stop-shop for writing their NBA legacy, showing off their skills on the streets, and competing with rival players online. NBA Live 19 adds some new wrinkles to this formula, but stagnancy in legacy modes and new gameplay problems prevent the series from taking a big step forward.

The newest addition NBA Live 19 brings to The One is Court Battles, a fantasy mode that allows you to bring NBA and WNBA players you've unlocked to defend your customizable home court. At the same time, you can take a squad on the road to conquer other users' courts populated by A.I. players of their choosing for Court Battle-themed rewards. These fantasy matchups call to mind arcade basketball games like NBA Playgrounds, but I don't get the same thrill from playing against random collections of A.I. as I do competing against other users or trying to capture an NBA championship.

You can still take your create-a-player's talents to the NBA in The League. Like last year, your mentor, coach, reporters, and others interact with you via texting, but this year social media influencers and ESPN personalities also discuss your promising career over highlight reels that play between games. This is a nice touch that makes you feel closer to the culture. The mode still has problems to resolve on the court, however. Teams (including your own) tend to play their bench players more than their starters, and the revamped grading system is lenient to the point of being meaningless, even rewarding you points for getting lucky with poorly timed shots and missing free throws.

The grading system is well intentioned, but I didn't notice a drop of selfish players in the early days of online play, even in the new 3v3 pickup games this year. This isn't EA's problem; such is the state of online gaming. Private lobbies exist for setting up your own 5v5 games if you find a group of serious players who also want to avoid the black-hole ballers frequently encountered in pickup games. However, with no team or league structure, this mode still feels woefully underdeveloped.

So do the modes not housed under the umbrella of The One. Franchise mode still lacks depth, and Live's Ultimate Team is the most under-developed version of the popular card-collection mode across the label's sports titles.

All the modes in the world don't add up to anything if the hardwood action isn't up to snuff. NBA Live 19 adds some integral new wrinkles like a dramatically improved off-ball dynamic that allows you to impede the movement of your mark and counter handsy defenders with cuts. Its dribbling and defensive mechanics are easy to comprehend and execute, making this the easier of the sim hoops games to pick up and play. But at the same time, the gameplay takes a few steps backward mainly due to locked animations that take control out of your hands and dictate your next movements.

To spice up the look of the action on the court, EA added thousands of new animations to NBA Live 19. The game looks more natural because of it, but since you can't branch out of some animations the controls feel sluggish. You can get sucked into unintended animations too frequently, which sometimes pull your player halfway across the court when you really wanted to go the other direction. Contextual shots near the hoop are unpredictable and often pull you out of good position. Too many plays that should result in easy dunks become needlessly complicated layups that are easily blocked by defenders. Passing also suffers; sometimes after you press the pass button the player holds onto the ball while the dribble animation plays out before they release the ball, and losing that half second can mean missing that open window where you tried to thread the needle.

NBA Live 19 offers interesting diversions when it moves away from its license and into the fantasy of The Streets and Court Battles. The NBA experience in franchise mode and The League, however, both need a lot of work to reach their potential. If EA can branch out of the canned animations to make the controls more responsive, the already decent gameplay could take a dramatic leap forward. The core at the heart of NBA Live still shows promise, but chalk this one up to a year of growing pains. » **Matt Bertz**

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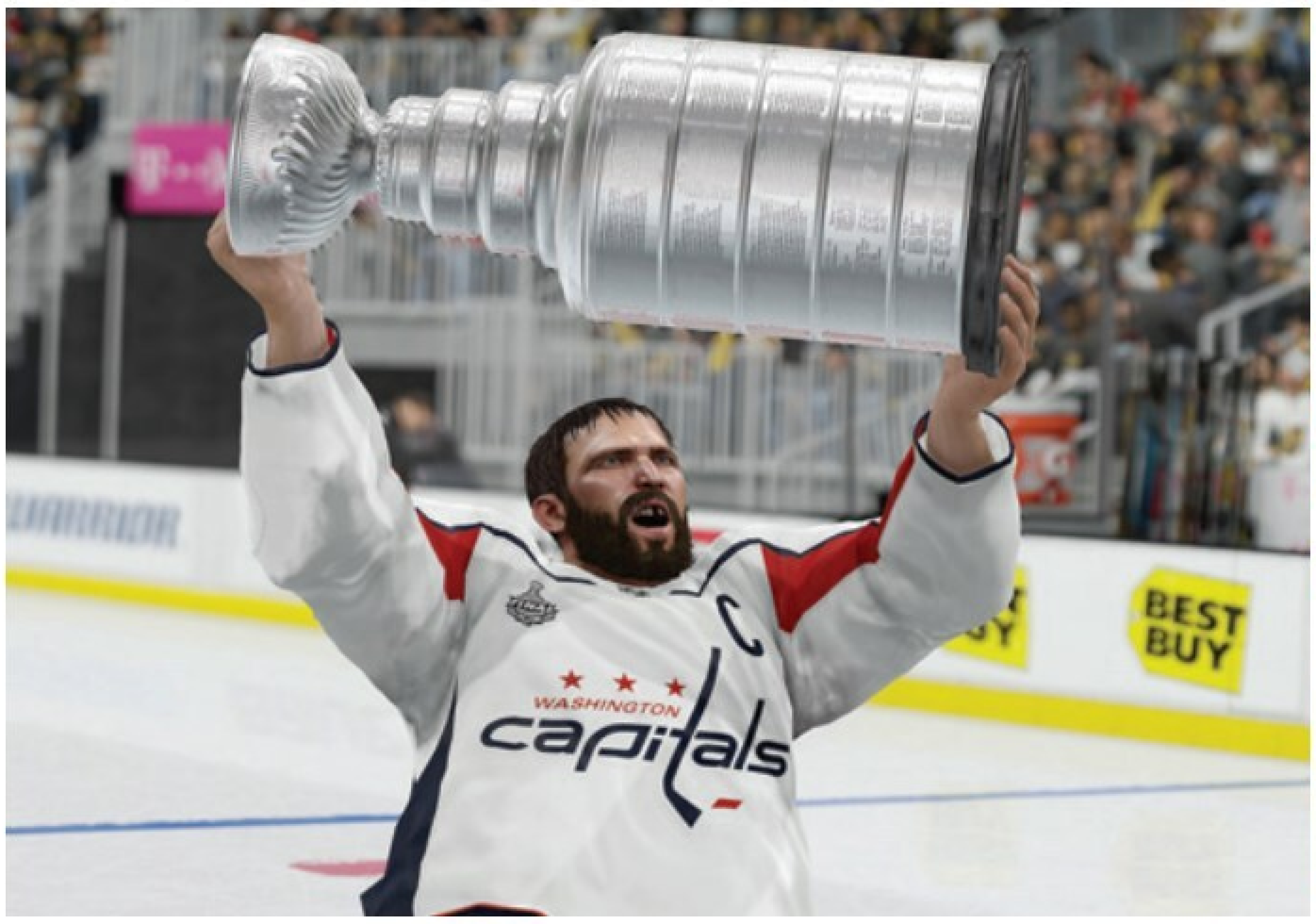
EQUALITY.

NHL 19

Top shelf snipe



MACKENZIE
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gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (12-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Vancouver **Release** September 14 **Rating** E

A prospect can have all the puck skills in the world, but it's not uncommon for players who regularly put up 100-point seasons in the CHL struggle to crack NHL lineups. The difference between true NHLers and a career minor leaguer can often be chalked up to one ability – skating technique. Over the last few years, EA's NHL franchise has underperformed like one of these plodding prospects largely due to the same factor. The players felt slow and unresponsive, a far cry from the burst and agility we see from NHL stars. With a new skating system, NHL 19 shows dramatic improvement in this crucial area, and the effects are felt across every mode in the robust package.

The skating may be the star of NHL 19, but the new collision physics get the assist. The physical side of hockey feels and looks better than ever, from small incidental contact where you inhibit a rival's movement to wince-inducing big hits that leave victims stunned on the ice. I saw the occasional awkward animation, particularly around the goal mouth, but overall players react more naturally to contact.

The impact of these changes cannot be understated, as they change the feel of the game through the myriad modes in NHL 19. Still, the gameplay isn't perfect. Poke checking is dramatically nerfed. Time will tell if the changes went too far for most people to reign in the pokes, but it requires rethinking your approach to defense. The teammate A.I. could also use some training at a hockey academy.

The flagship new mode for NHL 19 is World of Chel, a one-stop shop for all your online teamplay needs. From this hub, you can create a skater to take into the popular EASHL competitive mode, drop-in games for the arcade Threes mode, or the new Ones mode, which puts three skaters on the ice in a festival outdoor atmosphere where they square off to show their puck hogging skills and try to score the most goals in a set amount of time. Newcomers intimidated by the competition can also sharpen their skills in a breezy Pro-Am mode that pits you against waves of A.I. controlled modern stars and NHL legends. This is a decent onboarding experience, but it offers nothing but some easy progression upgrades for series veterans, who are better off sticking with the largely unchanged EASHL.

Whichever mode you play, you earn experience that rewards you with new skills and bags of cosmetic customization options. The skill customization is a welcome step up from the fixed archetype system of previous games that gave you no say in how your skater performed. Being able to mix-and-match unlocked traits and specialties and see how exactly they affect your ratings allows you to tailor a skater to more accurately fit your playing style. It's a nice step forward, but I'd still prefer a more robust player upgrade path like NBA 2K (or Live) that allows you to rank up and play a career mode with your created character as well. NHL 19 still has Be A Pro, but the mode has hardly kept up with the times and needs a serious reboot.

Franchise mode fans frustrated by years of neglect have a lot to look forward to in NHL 19 thanks to the reworked scouting system. Users now control a stable of up to 20 scouts responsible for finding the next diamond-in-the-rough prospects as well as keeping tabs on rival teams' rosters so you know when a trade offer is either an attempt to fleece you of a good player or worthy of serious consideration. If you're not keeping tabs on rival teams' prospect pools and upcoming free agents, you can make the kind of organizational missteps that could make you Mark Bergevin's chief rival as worst GM in hockey. But spend enough time with the systems and you can build a dynasty.

For those who prefer a more fantasy-oriented approach to team building, Ultimate Team returns reinvigorated thanks to a healthy injection of NHL legends and a new objectives system that rewards you coins for completing various goals. These additions are nice, but the mode still lacks the variety of single-player challenges you see in FIFA and Madden. The auction system needs to be burned to the ground and rebuilt as well; not being able to track the bids from one simple screen is maddening when you see how much better the experience is in the other versions of Ultimate Team.

NHL 19 still has its share of legacy issues that need attention, but the vastly improved skating and physics make this the best playing hockey game of the generation. The scouting system gives franchise mode a much-needed makeover, and while World of Chel feels like a half-built theme park right now, I'm excited about its future prospects. If you haven't played an NHL game in a while, this is the year to jump back over the boards. » **Matt Bertz**

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Raise the level of all modes with a new skating and physics engine that makes the play more fluid than ever before

» **Graphics**
A lack of real-world likenesses for many well-known players is immersion shattering

» **Sound**
The commentary team of Doc Emrick and Eddie Olczyk is stale; it may be time for a change in the booth to reinvigorate the broadcast

» **Playability**
This is the best the skating and checking has felt in years, which improves the experience across all modes

» **Entertainment**
Welcome improvements to the general gameplay and franchise mode make this the best NHL in years, but the team still has a lot of work to do with modernizing its career mode and cleaning up legacy issues

» **Replay Value**
High

NBA 2K19

Outworking and outplaying the competition

9

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Continue to elevate the already strong NBA 2K series across all its modes

» Graphics
The accurate player models and realistic movement make this the best-looking sports game

» Sound
The rotating commentary teams is a nice touch to keep the broadcasts fresh, and the Travis Scott-curated soundtrack is fantastic

» Playability
Defense is dramatically improved this year, making you rely on basketball smarts as well as twitch skills

» Entertainment
The most well-rounded sports game on the market once again

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** Visual Concepts **Release** September 7 **Rating** E

Over the last couple of decades, the NBA 2K series steadily emerged out of the niche sports game genre and solidified its place in mainstream pop culture. These days, pro players eagerly announce their ratings on social media, hip hop icons like Jay-Z and Pharrell Williams lend their talents for soundtrack curation, and the game stays high on the sales charts year round. The accolades are well deserved, because each year the development team at Visual Concepts improves all the game modes, tightens the on-court action in all the right ways, and takes risks to move the genre forward. NBA 2K19 continues this positive trajectory.

The centerpiece MyCareer mode once again gives players many unique ways to grow and improve their created player. The story follows a highly motivated baller (inexplicably named A.I. – no relation to Allen Iverson) whose path to the NBA takes him overseas to China and through the NBA minor league. The well-acted cutscenes featuring well-developed characters and interesting situations stand in stark contrast to last year's wayward effort, but the length of these sequences would make Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima blush and they offer little choice in its trajectory. You still begin as a dramatically under-skilled player, which makes the early stages of your career a plodding affair where every other player on the court is more talented than you. I say it every year, but I wish 2K gave you quality-of-life upgrades like a decent amount of stamina, speed, and agility to kick off your career. The grind for becoming a better player still exists in the form of level cap breakers and upgradeable badges, so making your player so feeble to begin with seems unnecessary.

Once you make it to the NBA (which takes a few hours), MyCareer opens up the revamped Neighborhood, which has a dramatically improved layout that places the playground courts in the middle and the shops around the periphery. Earning VC won't be as hard as in years past thanks to easily achievable daily bonuses, a free daily spin of a rewards wheel, flexible endorsement contracts that give you more say over how you earn extra VC, and live events like dodgeball and trivia that generously reward the victors.

If NBA 2K18 rubbed you the wrong way with its aggressive approach to encouraging spending, this year's edition doesn't ease off in that regard. You can spend currency on upgrading your character to the level cap, buying new clothes, or acquiring performance-enhancing boosts from a kiosk right out in the open (is the NBA cool with that?). I personally don't care if people spend their money on visual customization, but creating an uneven playing field can compromise the competitive experience.

Those who like to let their MyPlayer's skills shine in online competition have even more options at their disposal this year. The Park and Pro-Am return (the latter of which finally offers private matches), but NBA 2K19 also adds a 3v3 mode resurrecting the Crews branding and an arcadey trampoline basketball experience. Crews fills a nice gap in the 2K offering by letting you create a squad, customize jerseys, and compete with two other friends against other players and A.I. challengers. The trampoline basketball in The Cages, on the other hand, feels like a throwaway gimmick I won't spend much time playing. The full array of options impresses, but Visual Concepts still has infrastructure problems in competitive multiplayer. Its stubborn insistence in making players queue for park games drives me mad. Time is precious, and the "got next" concept wastes it by forcing players to needlessly stand around. Why can't I just jump into a game immediately via a menu like I can with the NBA or Pro-Am games? The matchmaking also could use some work to better pair players of similar ratings. Squaring off as a brown-shirt 60 overall against someone with vastly superior skills isn't a good way to encourage more players to compete online in these strong modes.

Franchise fans have a lot to look forward to in NBA 2K19. MyGM picks

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up where last year's game left off and puts you in control of a new expansion team. You must guide the new franchise through its branding design and expansion draft. The story brings back familiar faces from last year in interesting ways, including everyone's favorite heel Andrew Sanderson, but I wish the story featured more realistic behind-the-scenes drama. Your front office must contend with sniffing out a mole leaking sensitive player profiles, which is the highlight of the experience, but otherwise a lot of your time is wasted playing trivial pickup games with the hillbilly owner or trading meaningless barbs with your rival instead of dealing with locker room tension, trade rumors, and the myriad other compelling circumstances that can arise in real NBA front offices. The fodder is there for the MyGM story to be remarkable, Visual Concepts just needs to tap into that rich reservoir more earnestly. It's also curiously easy to build a contender right out the gate; in one simple conversation I somehow lured LeBron James to the team and the rest took care of itself.

If you don't need story in your franchise experience, you can skip it altogether and start a traditional MyGM experience. The best new feature in the mode this year is the mentorship system, which allows you to put a young player under the wing of a veteran to speed up how quickly they earn badges of your choosing. This is a smart system that changed the way I viewed my reserves. Instead of stashing low-rated talent that would never earn minutes on the floor, I instead sought out aging veterans who had valuable badges I wanted my young up-and-comers to earn. The rest of the mode plays out the same as previous years, but if you have problems with the trade or free agency logic you can now tweak them to your hearts' content. The other franchise mode, MyLeague, improves dramatically thanks to live draft and free agency events that let rivals in online leagues try to outduel each other for talent.

Card-collection mode fans also have plenty to digest with MyTeam this year. The revamped interface makes it easier to navigate the menus, and the addition of the 3v3 Triple Threat and salary cap free Unlimited modes provide plenty of depth. However, MyTeam still has some legacy issues I wish Visual Concepts would resolve. Locking players out of the auction house until they play through several challenges is annoying, especially when you're already sitting on duplicate cards that you plan to offload. The mode still stubbornly clings to disposables like contracts and shoe boosts as well when competing modes in other sports games have moved beyond them.

On the court, NBA 2K19 shines thanks to a fresh coat of polish that evens out last year's most glaring issues. Players have the choice of multiple shot meters, and the egregious clipping animations that occasionally killed immersion are gone. The defense is dramatically improved as well, making it easier to stay on your mark. Attackers must do a better job of protecting the ball or risk being stripped, and passes through high traffic areas are way more likely to be picked off or at least tipped. My only major gripes thus far are the sluggish speed of the transition game and the fact that you weirdly get caught on the backs of opposing players when cutting through traffic. Some legacy issues like the lack of boundary awareness still pop up from time to time, but make no mistake, this the best playing basketball game on the market.

NBA 2K19 isn't just a game; it's a lifestyle. Whether you are a hardcore franchise mode fan, card collection aficionado, or invested in making a mark with your MyPlayer, Visual Concepts latest ode to basketball offers a wealth of satisfying content that should keep you occupied well past the point the Golden State Warriors raise yet another championship trophy. » **Matt Bertz**

FIFA 19

More familiar than fantastic

8

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Vancouver **Release** September 28 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Make gameplay improvements while not doing a lot to the modes themselves

» **Graphics**
Player faces are excellent and the presentation – drawn from the real-life telecasts for some leagues – remains top-notch

» **Sound**
Derek Rae and Lee Dixon commentate the Champions League matches which is cool, but their commentary itself isn't impressive

» **Playability**
The new pre-set tactics mapped to the d-pad are welcome and easy to set up and execute

» **Entertainment**
FIFA 19 is more exciting on the pitch than off due to the small additions made to the former and the lack of progress for the latter

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

FIFA 19 doesn't have many vital, new additions. Career mode is practically the same and Ultimate Team's biggest change impacts only competitive players. However, the gameplay is satisfying enough that even with some of the series' legacy issues, I witnessed many moments where I could say, "Last year that would have never have happened." These don't transform the series' fundamental experience, but they add up and entertain to cut through the stagnation of the modes.

In FIFA 19, a player in the box might try to get off a shot with a desperate slide or hurry their attempt with their weak foot and send it wide. Natural actions like these didn't always happen in the past, but now make the game feel less stiff. Similarly, players' feet can bring in slightly wayward passes, first touches exhibit fine footwork (or the lack thereof), and dangling legs and feet can produce passes and disrupt them from the other team. 50/50 balls in the open up for grabs between players also produce varied results. While the determination of who gets possession is still animation-based (and therefore not always correct), it's nice to see the ball dribble out unexpectedly at times.

Along with other welcome surprises like more near-miss shots come those of the less-pleasant variety: headers that have too much velocity and which are sometimes undefendable in the box, passes nowhere near the mark, and bouncy ball physics that make the new flick moves odd.

FIFA fans will recognize some of these legacy gameplay issues, as they will much of the career mode because it's largely the same as last year. Your club gets more transfer money to play with because some of it carries over from year to year, but you can't always trust the A.I. to conduct prudent transfer busines. Fringe players ask for playing time above their station, the transfer market dries up quickly, and squad rotation due to fatigue is not a concern as it is in real life. These don't break the mode, but they are symptoms of its staleness – which is not solved by the addition of the Champions League and Europa League.

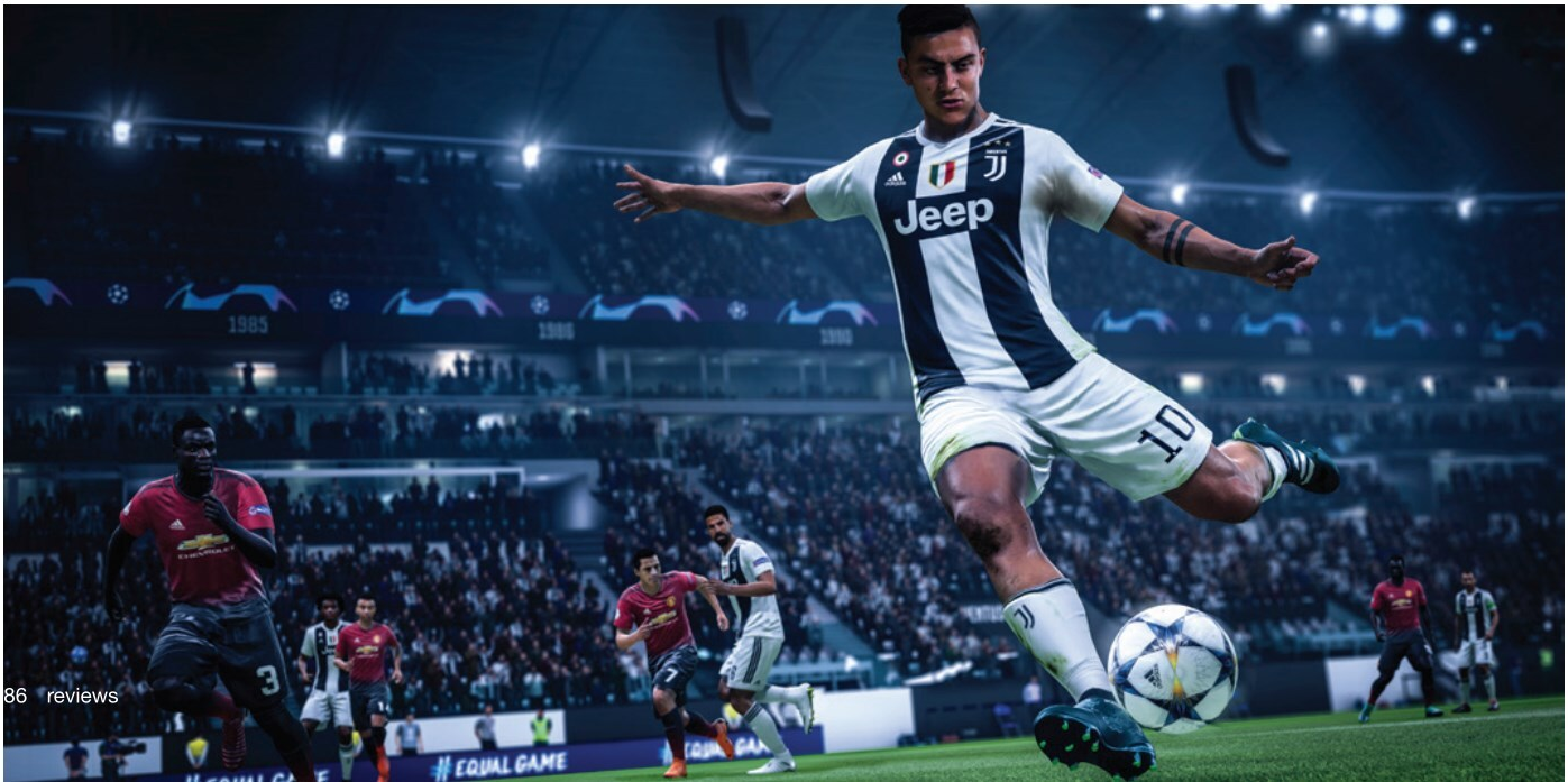
The Journey story mode is back, but whereas it was nice to catch up with Alex Hunter and Danny Williams last year, the finale to their tale here is drained of such fascination. The calendar of training sessions (with new skill games) and matches is a familiar and tedious grind which neither the story's predictability nor progression can solve. Danny has a jerk brother? Don't worry, it's not a spoiler because you don't care. Adding Kim Hunter's journey as an ascending USWNT star is welcome, as is being able to switch between each character's story at will, but it doesn't lessen the burden, fix the rigid skills tree, or make your teammates smarter. The Journey this year isn't worse, but having more of it doesn't make it better, either.

Ultimate Team is FIFA 19's one mode that enjoys some growth – at least if you're a competitive Weekend League player. Qualification is more accommodating of when you want to play, and the leagues has been shortened to 30 games in three days. However, casual players are limited to Squad Building Challenges that can cost a relatively high amount of coins for packs without good odds, and a marketplace that needs quality-of-life-improvements to better help you find cards. I like FIFA Ultimate Team, but unlike the version found in Madden, I tire out quicker because my avenues to making coins are less enjoyable.

Ironically, the one mode in the game that is usually not worth mentioning – the Kick Off exhibition mode – has something to talk about this year with the inclusion of couch-based House Rules games revolving around variations like long-range goals counting for two and the leg-breaking, card-free No Rules match type.

FIFA 19 sits relatively still this transfer window. We may want a shiny, new multimillion dollar acquisition to come in and transform everything, but that hasn't happened. Instead, developer EA Vancouver has added just enough to keep things ticking along. The gameplay cuts down on predictability, providing a layer of freshness to the familiar and producing a squad that can compete – but is also in danger of missing a Champions League spot.

» **Matthew Kato**



Pro Evolution Soccer 2019

Moments of magic

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Konami **Release** August 28 **Rating** E

Control has always been one of the masterstrokes of the PES franchise – particularly the ability to express yourself on the pitch, making even those small touches of the ball important. PES 2019 continues this glorious tradition in new ways, but it's juxtaposed by the A.I., which is out of your control, predictable in its attack, and executes questionable transfer business. PES 2019 hits more highs than previous iterations, but it's also bumping up against its own ceiling.

Last year, PES slowed its gameplay speed down, which made it feel better and more exacting, and this year expands the level of detail with the way players react – sometimes unsuccessfully – to the ball. The added variance in passes, even when they go slightly astray, introduces a realistic dynamic to the game. It's exhilarating to see your striker try to control the ball with an extra touch on the outside of his boot while he's on the full gallop. Even when he subsequently fires the ball into the side netting because the angle got worse as he quickly approaches the byline, it's a nice dose of realism. I liked having to be more aware of how players receive passes, their fatigue level, and even that a through ball may go out of bounds, further separating the good players from the average.

The gameplay still has its faults, however, such as how players' legs clip through each other and how predetermined animations can take away some control. Unlike last year, it feels like player switching can sometimes leave you at a disadvantage because of whom you're given. The A.I. also wears out its welcome in that its attack is predominately down the flanks, and defenders can switch off at times.

The A.I. further exposes its faults in the Master League career mode, because it's unable to steward non-player-controlled teams through transfer windows without dangerously thinning the squad depth in some positions while going on a spending spree for others. Similarly, transfer amounts don't reflect the craziness of the real world, and old stars (and even good-but-not-great players) hold on to their value too much in comparison with hot up-and-comers.

This is a shame because the mode offers a lot of depth when it comes to building a squad of champions. I like the team roles that give bonuses for the whole squad, the ability to direct whether funds go into your transfer or salary budgets, and the new manager missions (in Master League's Challenge setting) that task you with goals from the owner.

The mode is great about assembling your team and training them up, but it's not as good at doing the same for the rest of the league. It's not a question of just having more or certain league/team licenses. It's that the world outside of your team doesn't come across nearly as well. This comes down to not only the A.I.'s transfer behavior, but players' listed personalities don't manifest themselves in being unsettled and wanting a transfer, and fans, rivalries, and the larger league context barely give the mode a broader focus.

It remains to be seen how a larger scope might affect this year's MyClub fantasy mode, which needs more post-launch competitions and other competitive and even single-player ways to play than last year. Like Master League mode, it's fun to grow your team through training (as opposed to lusting after the card du jour), but even with the awesome co-op play, it stalls if you have to grind the same tournaments and ranked matches.

It's easy for me to sit and revel in what I love about PES, jogging through instant replay just to gawk at a foot flick a ball on to a teammate or charting out the future of my Master League club. But occasionally that reverence is broken by an ill-suited moment that illustrates that more work needs to be done. The franchise is steps away from greatness, which makes some of its foibles frustrating. » **Matthew Kato**

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
The game provides small changes to the Master League career mode and the Ultimate Team-esque MyClub. But the feel of playing the game is what stands out the most

» **Graphics**
It sounds insignificant, but the look of the pitch is amazing. The player faces continue to look great, but mainly when they're not emoting

» **Sound**
At the beginning of a match, commentators Beglin and Drury offer contextual comments such as the score of your last match, but this awareness doesn't continue through the entire match

» **Playability**
Player switching is a step down from last year, leaving you controlling an unexpected player from time to time

» **Entertainment**
The gameplay is as engrossing as ever, but it and the marquee Master League mode are still looking for a few changes to take the series to the next level

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Shadow Of The Tomb Raider

In the shadow of something greater

7.5

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Eidos Montreal, Crystal Dynamics **Release** September 14 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Throw yourself back into danger as Lara Croft by traveling around Latin America and fighting off Trinity to prevent the Mayan Apocalypse

» **Graphics**
Visuals look great, especially during chaotic action sequences, but expect a few graphical hiccups

» **Sound**
Camilla Luddington returns to voice Lara and nails her role alongside Earl Baylon as Jonah. The music and sound effects serve their purpose when necessary

» **Playability**
The game offers multiple difficulty levels for its three main components: combat, puzzles, and exploration, giving players of all skill levels admission to the journey

» **Entertainment**
It delivers bombastic action alongside an engaging collecting and crafting loop. Sadly, the same can't be said for Lara Croft and the overall narrative

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Over five years ago, we were introduced to a revamped Lara Croft, different than the one we'd known for decades. Crystal Dynamics took on the task of rebooting the character by creating an origin story that gave us deeper insight into her personality and show her at her most vulnerable. It was an exciting change of pace, as we were watching her grow from inexperienced adventurer to full-fledged tomb raider. Shadow of the Tomb Raider provides the final piece of this transformation, showing us her defining moment of becoming the wall-climbing relic hunter she was meant to be. This chapter should be an exciting climax that encapsulates the series at its best, but instead, it's a step back.

The plot involves Lara accidentally setting an apocalypse in motion and later discovering her long adversary Trinity's connection to it. The interesting parts of the narrative aren't so much about how it unfolds, but about how Lara handles the things that have long haunted her, whether it's her unresolved feelings over losing her parents or determining what measures she'll take for the greater good of the world.

While the story and her characterization have some great moments, they also have some not-so-great ones. What bothered me most was Lara's actions not matching the character we're presented. One minute, she's showing a softer side by giving children some hidden treasure or trying to reunite a man falsely accused of murder with his distraught daughter, but the next she's going on killing sprees and hanging corpses. Motivation for some of her violent outbursts is provided, but I always felt like I was playing as two different Laras.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider still has all the things I love about the series: tense escape sequences, secrets to uncover during exploration, and a sense of accomplishment from solving a difficult challenge tomb. However, as with the story, the gameplay has its highs and lows.

The action remains over the top and intense; you do everything from fighting jaguars to trying to survive tsunamis, all the while locating crypts and tombs containing death-defying leaps. Overhang climbing adds some verticality to the experience, while the addition of rappelling and wall-running makes this element of the game more fun.

Exploration is still a central and exciting fixture, especially with more underwater places to search. How much you want to spend tracking everything down is up to you, and you're not punished from a lack of total completion. While some parts are interesting, the bulk of the side content is humdrum fetch quests and lackluster fights, though they do often reward your efforts handsomely with better weaponry or gear. What I like about the overall progression loop is that you gain experience points for going out of your way to search every nook and cranny. This helps you earn skill points to upgrade Lara's abilities.

The skill tree is split up into three areas: seeker (exploration), warrior (combat), and scavenger (crafting and stealth). To unlock these additional perks, you need to activate adjacent squares, which can sometimes mean unlocking a skill you don't really need to open up a better one. The upgrade system is shallow, and outside of a few abilities, you never feel like you're dipping your points into anything all that impactful. I did, however, enjoy the addition of craftable costumes, which gave me a way to build Lara more toward my playstyle by adding perks, such as more XP for stealth kills, lowering detections from animals and humans, and gaining additional resources.

As for the combat, the gunplay is competent, and Lara's bow and arrow is great for headshots, but the game certainly favors a stealth approach, with various places to climb or hide to get a jump on the enemy. Lara can now use mud to help conceal herself and blend into walls. Going in guns blazing is riskier and means mowing down a lot more enemies, but I had fun crafting explosives and using my fire arrows to blow up flammable objects to take out groups. Stealth was my preference and I felt it had more entertaining and strategic options, but this system also has some rough edges. I had some laughable moments where I should have been detected and was rewarded stealth kills when an enemy clearly saw me and alerted others.

The whole adventure culminates in an ending that also isn't quite up to snuff. I immediately thought, "This is her defining moment? Her evolution into the Tomb Raider?" After following this origin story for three games, I hoped for a more rewarding finale.

Lara Croft often throws herself headfirst into the action without seeing the bigger picture. In a way, that's a good a parallel for Shadow of the Tomb Raider. Parts feel rushed with odd scene jumps, and some of the gameplay systems are half-baked. As the final game in Lara Croft's origin story, it just didn't hit the high note it needed to. Still, that doesn't mean it's not a crazy, high-stakes adventure worth taking. » **Kimberley Wallace**

The Bard's Tale IV: Barrows Deep

A dissonant tune

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** inXile Entertainment **Developer** inXile Entertainment **Release** September 18 **Rating** T

Veteran PC gamers may remember skirting the streets of Skara Brae years ago, and the Bard's Tale IV takes us back to those times of guilds, monsters, and adventurers. This title is absolutely a love letter to the RPGs of yesteryear, and a decent option for those looking for more modern titles faithful to that style. However, along with a thirst for battle, you need to have a hearty appetite for exploration and mind-numbing puzzles to appreciate this journey.

Combat shines in The Bard's Tale IV, with position-based encounters that present new opportunities and combos. Your team has a pool of opportunity points to use each turn, with free spellcasting on top if you have the mana. Considering your positioning and ability use each turn is great, giving battles high stakes as you interrupt enemy spellcasters or move out of the way of massive axe blows. Fights allow plenty of freedom in terms of difficulty; you can take on fights far above your level and the victories and the rewards are satisfying. Between grid positioning, channeling, and various ways to make the most of each resource, combat is a joy and handled with finesse.

The systems behind combat are less compelling. Each character can only bring a handful of abilities into battle, and selecting your loadout is not interesting because your options are limited if you want a successful crew. Though you can technically experiment with group composition, you need to ensure you have a healthy mix of interrupts, damage, and resource generation. You don't have the flexibility to take more than the necessities, like a classic fighter/caster mix with a hefty frontline and magical barrage backline.

This streamlining feels needlessly restrictive, and it trickles down into character development. Skill trees are tiered, so your character needs to put many skill points into lesser skills to unlock higher tiers, which keeps them from becoming too powerful too early. While this constraint may protect players from irreparably screwing up characters, it feels more like linear progression than meaningful choice.

Your party makes its way through Skara Brae and to beautiful worlds beyond. Loot is everywhere and a satisfying crafting system allows you to create everything you need to keep going, from grappling hooks to steak. Your signature tool, however, is a selection of bardic songs used to uncover secrets and shortcuts. The list promises hammers to knock down walls, fanfare to illuminate hidden treasures, and melodic vocals revealing enemies. That sounds interesting, but in practice, you can just sing every song when you're faced with an impasse to see what works, rendering the variety of different tunes worthless.

You absolutely need a high tolerance for puzzles to enjoy The Bard's Tale IV, which throws an absurd number of brain-twisters at the player, ranging from easy-to-solve dwarven gear doors to esoteric runic combinations. Some mandatory puzzles stymie progression and feel incredibly overbearing, especially in areas that present puzzle after puzzle after puzzle. I yearned for even a minor goblin to massacre after rooms of blocks, spikes, runes, and traps. These sections are frustrating and take much of the energy out of the excellent combat system by replacing it with tedious fiddling. Purists may love solving riddles spewed forth from disembodied wall-mouths, but the frequency in some areas is simply befuddling and detracting. Even though the game comes with a guide featuring all major solutions, looking up answers doesn't make the puzzle gauntlet satisfying or fun.

The Bard's Tale IV pays dutiful homage to its roots and offers an accessible way to experience the joy of the old-school RPG, but the enjoyable complexity has been sacrificed. Long puzzle mazes detract from the inspired combat system, and occasional crashes after a big battle can be discouraging. That said, if you're looking for that vintage style with some enchanting new-age accoutrements, the endearing melodies of the Bard's Tale IV won't lead you astray.

» **Daniel Tack**

7.75

PC

» **Concept**
Form a party of adventurers in a classic dungeon-crawl filled with puzzles, monsters, and treasure

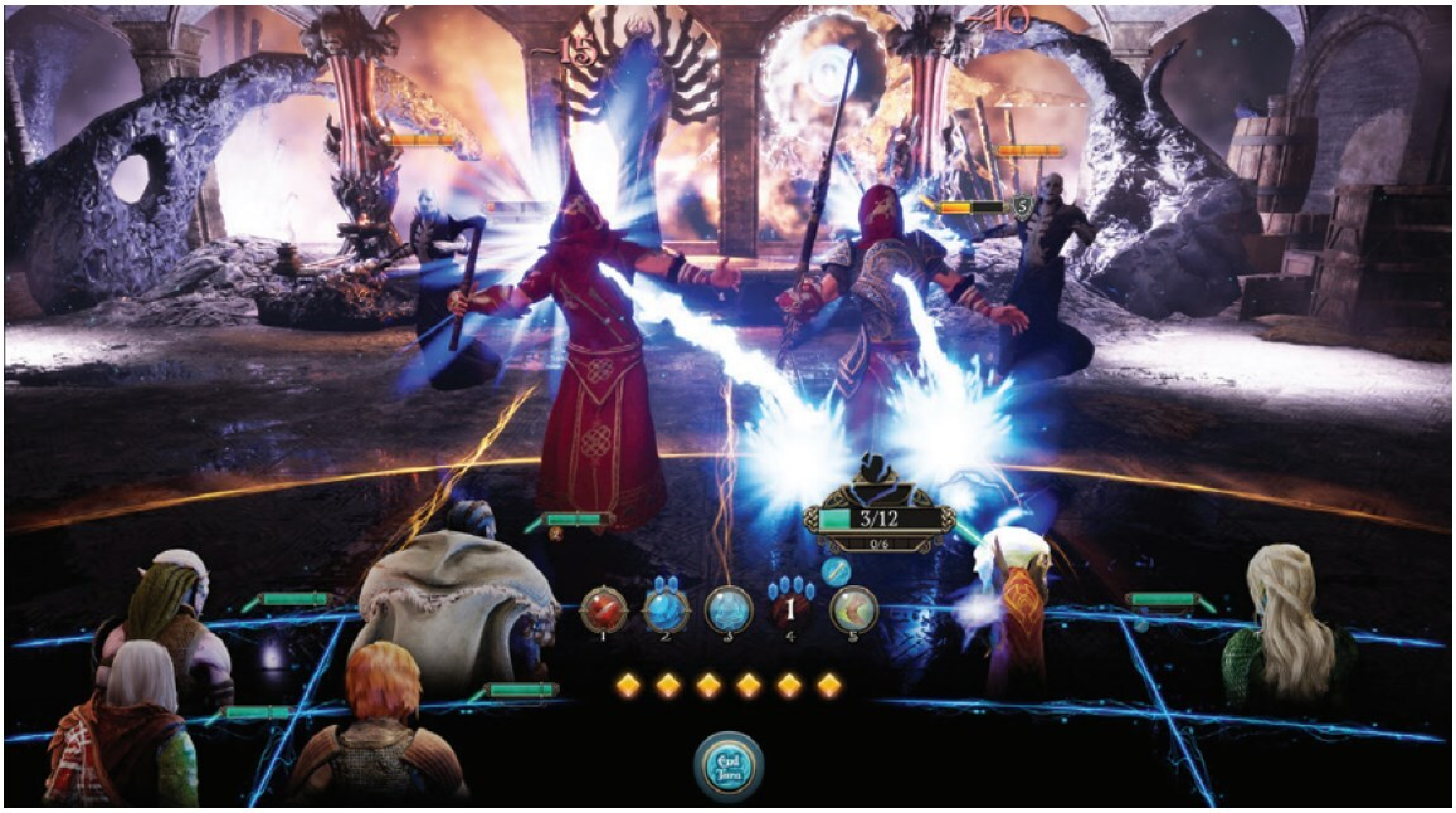
» **Graphics**
A strange mix of realism and surrealism creates enchanting environments despite the grid inspiration of ancient CRPGs

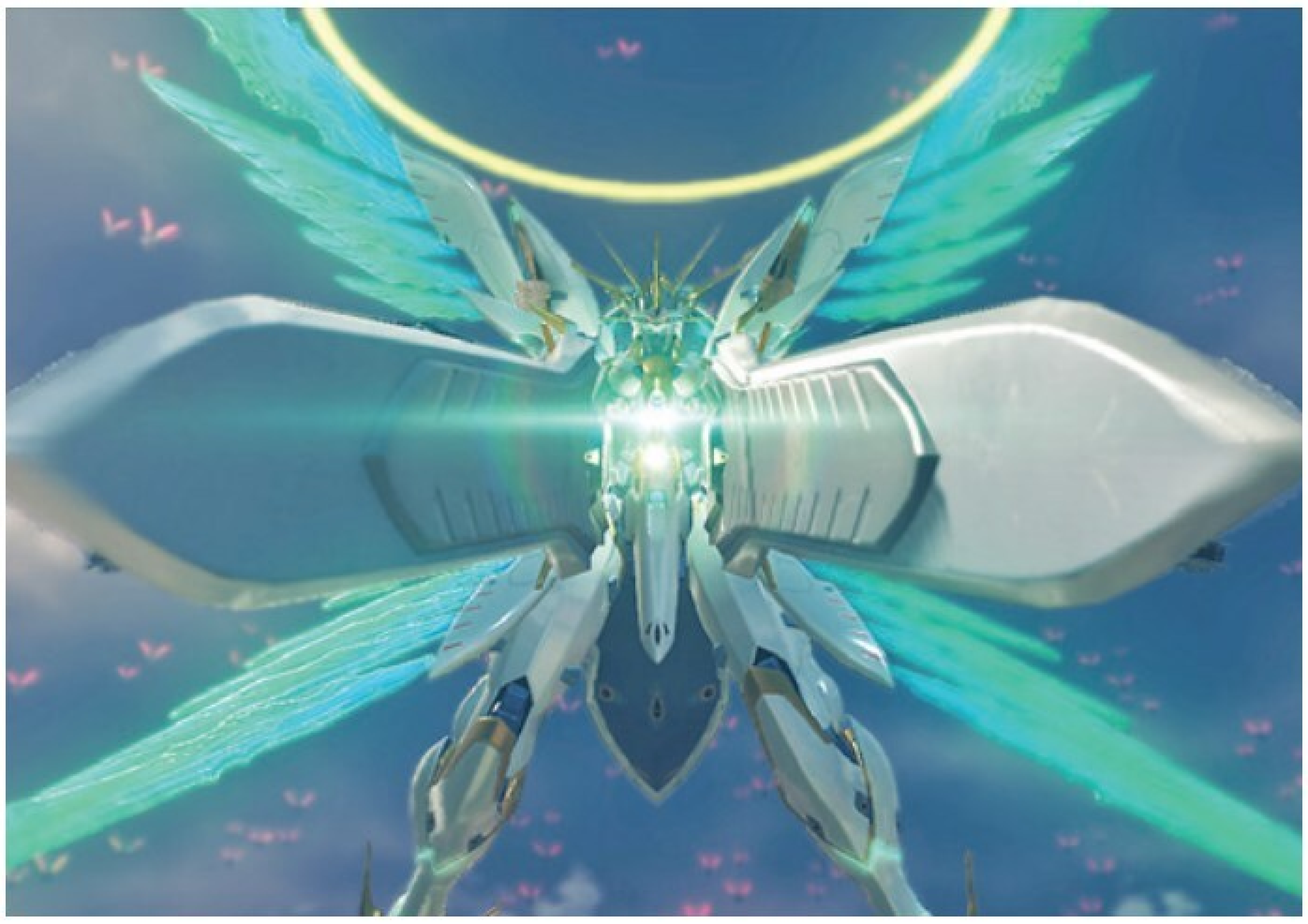
» **Sound**
Music is at the core of the Bard's Tale, and the blend of lilting melodies and voice performance immerse the player

» **Playability**
Anyone can play thanks to streamlined character creation and skill systems, but the old-school style and back-to-back puzzles are less accessible

» **Entertainment**
The Bard's Tale IV offers a modern delve into a classic RPG format, but sometimes-frustrating puzzles dim the dungeon dive

» **Replay Value**
Moderate





Xenoblade Chronicles 2: Torna – The Golden Country

Stepping backwards

7

Switch

» Concept
See how the past influences the present in this prequel expansion featuring a new story with familiar faces

» Graphics
Handheld mode still takes a noticeable visual hit, but the characters and environment designs are consistent

» Sound
Voice performers from the base game reprise their roles, and the musical score is done well

» Playability
Multiple forms of progression and a complex battle system result in lots of unintuitive menu screens

» Entertainment
Though pacing problems make the journey far from riveting, the gameplay tweaks and overall story are worth experiencing if you're already a fan of Xenoblade Chronicles 2

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Monolith Soft **Release** September 14 **Rating** T

In Xenoblade Chronicles 2, players could easily spend 100 hours fighting monsters, completing side quests, and collecting items. While that lengthy RPG was worthwhile (especially after post-release enhancements), repetitive and mundane quests made many of those hours feel like bloat. As a comparatively short expansion, Torna: The Golden Country had the opportunity to trim the fat and present a more focused experienced. It doesn't. Instead, The Golden Country doubles down on the busywork, making more of it mandatory while providing fewer rewards for your effort.

The Golden Country details events that occurred 500 years before Xenoblade Chronicles 2, and that story is the biggest draw. You learn about characters and conflicts that were only briefly explored before, like Jin's relationship with his driver Lora, and the confrontation between Mythra and Malos. The gravity of the tale depends on the player's knowledge of these characters and how the world eventually changes in response to their deeds (this is not a good place for newcomers to join), and I enjoyed seeing the narrative threads that connect the two time periods. If you are a fan of Xenoblade Chronicles 2, these moments alone make The Golden Country worth playing, as long as you're willing to pay the price.

Of the 17 hours it took me to finish The Golden Country, only about half of that time was spent participating in the new narrative. For the rest of it, you can expect to complete a series of boring fetch and collection quests thanks to the new community system. When you complete a side quest, the quest-giver (and sometimes other characters) join your community, which is a visual representation of all of the people you've helped. They don't impart any bonuses or benefits, but the more people you aid, the higher your community level rises. This seems like a neat idea at first, but the problem is that your community level only has one main purpose: preventing you from progressing in the main story. At a couple points, you aren't allowed to take on the next central quest until you hit a community threshold. For example, you can't fight the final boss until level four, which involves sinking hours into tedious chores that aren't interesting, well-written, or connected to the narrative in any meaningful way. This structure kills the pacing and pointlessly inflates the amount of time The Golden Country requires.

Though it has trouble balancing quality and quantity, the game isn't a constant slog. You get in a lot of battles along the way, and the combat system has been revamped and improved for this entry. It's still a real-time affair that has you auto-attacking and activating skills, but an increased focus on character-switching makes the action feel more fluid. This means less waiting for cooldowns and more direct control, and it makes encounters more entertaining and engaging. However, variety still remains a problem; enemies rarely require any variation in your tactics, so regardless of your opponent, battles usually follow the pattern of lining up combos and stacking elemental orbs.

Despite the legacy issues, developer Monolith Soft has also learned some lessons in the last year.

One of the biggest aggravations from the base game, shuffling party members to complete field skill challenges, is no longer a factor in The Golden Country. All available characters are always at your side, and they don't have redundant skills (only one character has superstrength, for instance). I appreciated knowing my success or failure immediately without wading through menus to see if I can squeeze out one more point of fortitude somewhere. I'm also glad to see features that were added later to Xenoblade Chronicles 2 included here, like new game+ and an auto-battle option.

Cool story moments and combat improvements offset some of The Golden Country's frustrations, but not enough to entirely redeem the experience. It is missing some of the best parts of the base game (like the thrill of collecting unique allies and completing quests tailored to them), but retains many stumbling blocks that impeded the fun before. However, the way the story fills in gaps and provides insight into the characters makes The Golden Country a satisfying addition for fans who have already built up a tolerance for the sometimes-baffling quirks of Xenoblade Chronicles 2. » **Joe Juba**

Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate

Touching up the past

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** August 28 **Rating** T

In Monster Hunter, you quickly learn to treat the quiet moments before you stalk your prey with the same seriousness as the hunt itself. Taking a trip to the market to buy potions or scarfing down a stat-boosting meal might be what separates a close-call victory from a brutal defeat. Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate offers more than enough thrilling challenges to test the skills of tactical-minded players. Generations Ultimate is a Switch remaster of the dense 3DS title from 2016, presenting players with systems that take hours to learn. For dedicated monster slayers, deep rewards await as you carve pieces from your fallen foes and craft the fantastic armor and weapons that fuel this engrossing adventure.

You play as a hunter, undertaking quests to slay monsters with the help of your Palico (a feline assistant) or other hunters. Generations is a remixed, greatest-hits version of previous Monster Hunter games, meaning it has a massive roster of beasts to hunt down and a sizable selection of ways to do so. The story is threadbare, but that isn't the point; satisfying combat and the sense of power that comes from slaying (or capturing) monsters is what propels you forward.

You have an arsenal of sharp things to stab monsters with, including a sword/shield combo, a longblade, and dual swords. Weaponry that leans more toward the wacky and creative side includes cannon-like blowguns and insect glaives, which send out bugs to attack your targets. Each weapon is essentially a class, requiring hours to master. While that might sound frustrating, it is immensely gratifying to dance around monsters that once you gave you trouble, killing them with ease and grace.

Preparation is the most important part of Generations' loop, even more so than becoming competent with a weapon class. As you take on more difficult monsters, your inventory should be filled with portions and devices to give you the upper hand. You must also make sure your armor and weapons are constantly upgraded, which means scavenging zones for valuable resources when you're not stalking beasties. Hunting for some of the larger game can take up to nearly an hour before the fight ends, and losing due to an expired time limit or dwindling supplies is crushing.

Battling with any of Generations' beasts, whether it's the armored crab Daimyo Hermitaur or the fanged Niblesnarf, is an exhilarating experience – especially when you're dodging attacks and landing devastating blows. Taking on monsters is fun in multiplayer, with up to three other hunters joining the fray, but I found the challenge of fighting with only my Palicos at my side more enthralling and tense. Whenever I was frustrated in combat, it was usually because I made a mistake. However, a monster would sometimes throw me out of the zone and I'd have to sit through a brief loading screen to jump back into the fray. Occurrences like this, or the rare occasions my blade clipped through an enemy without causing damage, are frustrating – but they hardly ruin the entertainment.

Ultimate's jump from 3DS to Switch results in a big improvement, especially when it comes to visuals. Gone are the cluttered UI and grainy visuals. The more generous real estate of the Switch's screen and the visual fidelity are immediately noticeable. Colors pop brightly. Muddy textures are now as sharp as a rapier's point; the draw distance clearly showcases pretty vistas of snowy mountains and forests.

The most disappointing aspect of Generations Ultimate is a lack of content incentives for players who already sunk a hundred hours into the original version. A carry-over save transfer option exists so you don't have to restart from the beginning (as well as the DLC from the 3DS version) but there's little actual new content beyond a few additional monsters and a new rank of beasts to hunt.

Outside of the lack of meaningful additions, Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate is still a massive and compelling timesink, offering over 90 beasts to pursue and defeat. Though this is fundamentally the same game that released two years ago, improvements to the playability and visuals keep the thrill of the hunt alive. The focus on preparation, as well the high cost for failing to do so, isn't for players who want a straightforward hack-and-slash game. But if you embrace Monster Hunter's demand for vigilance, this experience holds bountiful treasure.

» Javy Gwaltney

8.5

Switch

» Concept
Monster Hunter Generations makes the jump from 3DS to Switch with a bevy of improvements and content

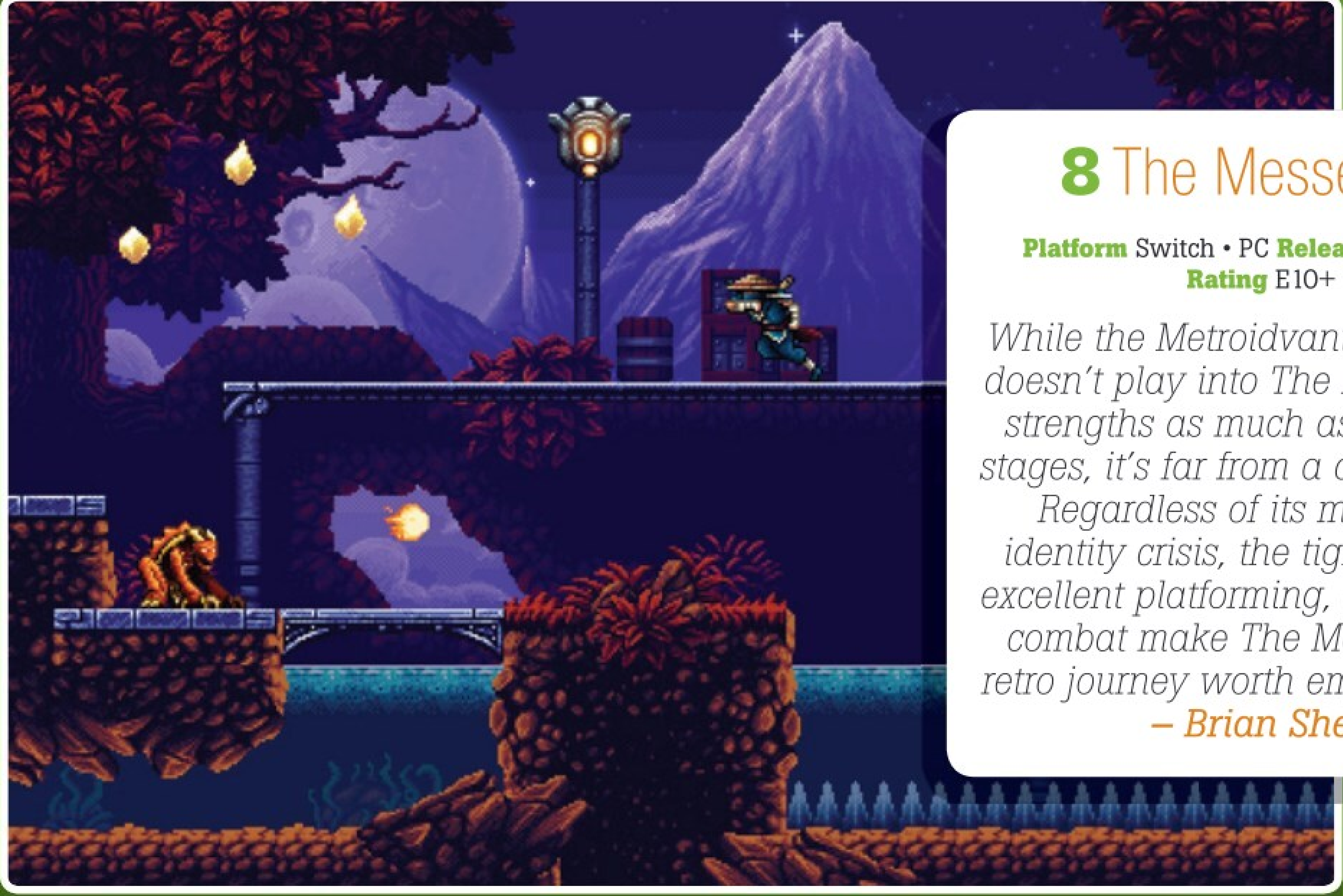
» Graphics
The increased clarity and resolution result in a huge visual bump compared to the 3DS version

» Sound
A pounding score provides an appropriate soundtrack to all the man-versus-beast action

» Playability
Despite its simple premise, getting a handle on Monster Hunter's interconnected systems can be rough. Nevertheless, it yields deep rewards

» Entertainment
Hunting dangerous quarry is a thrill thanks to a preparation-focused loop and fun crafting, though the lack of substantial additional content makes the value of a return trip questionable

» Replay Value
High



8 The Messenger

Platform Switch • PC **Release** August 30
Rating E10+

While the Metroidvania approach doesn't play into The Messenger's strengths as much as the linear stages, it's far from a deal breaker. Regardless of its mid-game identity crisis, the tight controls, excellent platforming, and exciting combat make The Messenger a retro journey worth embarking on. ***– Brian Shea***

7.5 NASCAR Heat 3

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release September 7 **Rating** E10+

The NASCAR Heat series is three years in and is just now hitting its stride. This year's addition to the career mode is a solid foundation that pays off in the present and sets it up for the future. ***– Matthew Kato***

7.75 My Brother Rabbit

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • Mac
Release September 21 **Rating** E10+

An adventure game that successfully melds the tenderness of life with the power of imagination to create a beautiful and touching journey that unfolds through kaleidoscopic landscapes filled with puzzles and seek-and-find challenges. ***– Andrew Reiner***

7.5 Two Point Hospital

Platform PC • Mac **Release** August 30 **Rating** E10+

I loved Two Point Hospital's distinct charm and the thrill of researching treatments for absurd diseases. But the tiresome grind eventually wears down even the best parts of the experience. ***– Ben Reeves***

8 The Golf Club 2019

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release August 28 **Rating** E

Although the game quantified my success as I went from the Q-School to the Web.com Tour and finally to the PGA Tour, making it as a pro didn't feel as powerful as I thought it should. But that doesn't mean I was unfulfilled. ***– Matthew Kato***

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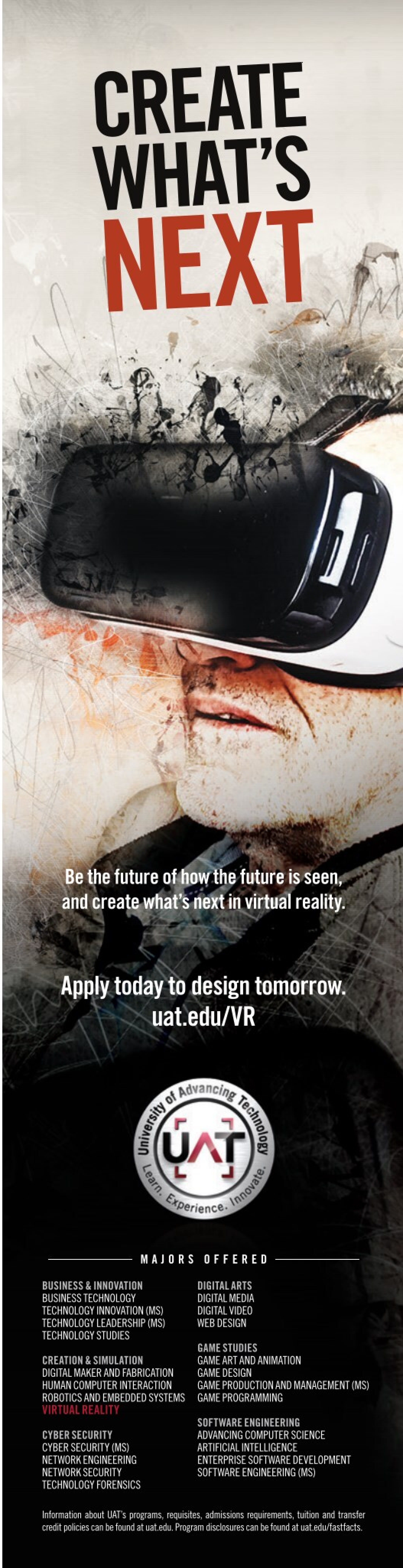

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DEAD SPACE

Reliving Isaac Clarke's Horrifying Inaugural Journey 10 Years Later

by Kyle Hilliard

A decade ago, Electronic Arts and Visceral Games entered the world of survival horror, surprising everyone with the violent tale of Isaac Clarke – an engineer who faced unimaginable terror and barely came out alive.

In 2008, Electronic Arts was known primarily for its annual sports, racing titles, licensed games, and recurring franchises like Battlefield and Medal of Honor. Horror was not in its repertoire, and it shied away from making new game concepts. This made its decision to go up against survival horror's biggest players like Resident Evil with a brand-new, unproven original universe a huge surprise. When Dead Space was announced, it was treated with qualified praise. The game was undeniably promising, but EA and Visceral had no track record for scary games, and players did not have the confidence the studio could deliver a truly terrifying experience.

In the face of players' hesitancy, Dead Space proved it was more than capable. It released to critical acclaim (*Game Informer* gave it a 9.25) and experienced commercial success, selling more than two million copies and inspiring multiple sequels and spin-offs. Protagonist Isaac Clarke's terrifying journey through the *USG Ishimura* hit a high bar for gamers. Taking on the monstrous necromorph threat while battling the inhospitable elements of space, provided an instantly engaging and consistently scary journey.

Michael Condrey, who co-founded Sledgehammer Games and recently co-directed Call of Duty: WWII, is credited as co-director on Dead Space and worked on the series from its inception. "Dead Space was an incredible experience for everyone involved, and a highlight in my 20-plus year career of making games," Condrey says. Condrey helped develop the world and its lore, as well as its gameplay mechanics.

"We started a new team with a small core of less than 15 developers and pitched the concept through several stages of EA's greenlight process." Condrey says. "Within a short time, we had a playable prototype experience that began to capture the tension that would later become synonymous with Dead Space." Resident Evil served as a major inspiration for the team, in both its early horror-focused forms and the later more action-focused format used in Resident Evil 4. "Initially, until we had a more developed prototype that people could play and experience for themselves, the creative north-star of 'Resident Evil in Space' and 'survival-horror meets *Alien*' captured the spirit of the art and design targets for the team," Condrey says.

System Shock was another influence for Dead Space based on its similar atmosphere and horror elements. The comparisons were so strong that after Dead Space's release, rumors surfaced that it originally began development as a System Shock sequel. "System Shock is an undeniable classic, and part of a highly acclaimed EA-owned franchise that had gone dormant," Condrey says. "While we were inspired by both the original and its sequel, Dead Space was never officially attached to the System Shock franchise in any capacity."

Rich Briggs was a producer on both Dead Space and its sequel, but you probably know him best as the face of the man who violently transforms into a necromorph in the opening moments of Dead Space 2. "I've always been honored to be the first person killed in Dead Space 2," Briggs says. "I, evidently, had the perfectly shaped head to let it transform into a necromoprh.

Isaac Clarke's Armor

Dead Space's art direction was iconic the moment the game launched. Isaac Clarke's armor stood out as an instantly recognizable piece of hardware that was both functional and scary. "We wanted Isaac to embody a grounded, average engineer with a recognizable set of armor and tools," Dead Space's co-director Michael Condrey says. "The Marines in the film *Aliens* are an example of a similar direction, in my opinion. While they were tier 1 soldiers set in the year 2179 and armed with futuristic pulse weapons, they were nearly indistinguishable from Marines of the 1980s. While Dead Space is set in the year 2508, you'll see inspiration for Isaac's suits from items like early deep-sea diving suits to modern welding masks. Similarly, elements from Isaac's tools, which became his weapons inventory, can be easily recognized by walking through the tools aisle at your local Home Depot."

By nature of my skull, I was the natural fit." Briggs says the original game was in development longer than the typical EA-published game. "It was a game that I think was a long time coming and it took a long time to convince people it was the right game to make at the right time, but we were really excited by the fan response and it was a ton of fun working on."

As the world was developed during pre-production, it morphed and evolved. "In total, the game was in development for nearly three years, the longest time I'd had to develop a game up to that point," Condrey says. Since it was a small team, EA was comfortable giving it space. "The time allowed us to take some risks, learn from some misses, and innovate in ways we hadn't been afforded on shorter development cycles," Condrey says. "The development also spanned the console transition from PS2 to PS3, and the added time also allowed us to push on engine technology advancements in important areas like rendering and audio that were key to delivering on the gritty and visceral atmosphere."

One of Dead Space's most defining mechanics is the way you attack the necromorph threat. Instead of aiming for their heads, you used Clarke's Plasma Cutter weapons, frequently in combination with the time-slowing stasis ability, to aim for the limbs and dismember the creatures. "The combination of the two together opened up a host of amazing combat and puzzle-based mechanics that exceeded our initial hopes, and became a cornerstone," Condrey says.

Dead Space was more than just fighting scary monsters in space, though. One of the reasons it stood out was because the world in which Dead Space takes place is a fully realized one. "Topics like religious zealots, depletion of natural resources, and the exploits of a rogue state beyond Earth's laws, were key to capturing a relatable version of a future conflict that players would embrace as plausible, and provoking," Condrey says. "The series *Black Mirror* captures a similar dark imagination for me today."

Notwithstanding the success of the Dead Space series, the franchise went dark following the launch of Dead Space 3. The third entry was critically the weakest of the main trilogy; EA said it did not sell as well as it hoped. Despite leaving EA to found Sledgehammer Games before the second and third entries released, Condrey says he would love to see it return. "I can't believe that October will mark 10 years since the game released," Condrey says. "I love thinking about what a new hardware generation return to the Dead Space mythos might mean for gamers. The original game remains near and dear to many of us, and I'd want the return only if it is treated with the same passion and care that the team brought to the original game."

New Game Plus

Dead Space the video game was a hit, but it also had a surprising amount of multimedia support behind it. A 75-minute animated prequel feature film, *Dead Space: Downfall*, came out alongside the game, and leading up the launch, a comic book series helped set up the story over the course of six months. The sequel games inspired additional films, novels, and comics, and there were even spin-off games like Dead Space: Extraction for the Wii.

Dead Space co-director Michael Condrey says an early, polished playable demo of the game helped to inspire internal excitement for the franchise, pushing the marketing and PR teams to advocate for the game and come up with all the expanded universe initiatives. "As late as 2013, EA even discussed a live-action theatrical film based on the original Dead Space, which was exciting to imagine for everyone on the original development team," Condrey says.

The Fascinating Branches Of Media Molecule's Family Tree

Media Molecule is a unique, vibrant company comprised of creative talent from a wide range of studios and unexpected places. Take a gander at the pedigree of people at the studio that has brought us LittleBigPlanet, Tearaway, and the upcoming Dreams. ***by Javy Gwaltney***

SIOBHAN REDDY

Reddy entered the world of video games as a production assistant for Perfect Entertainment in 1999, working on Discworld: Noire as a production assistant. Shortly after that, Reddy joined Criterion Games and worked on the Burnout franchise and Airblade before co-founding Media Molecule as studio director.

MARK HEALEY

Healey's time in the games industry stretches back to the Commodore 64 with KGB Superspy. From there, Healey went on to work for Bullfrog Productions, working on the art for cult classic titles like Magic Carpet, Theme Hospital, and Dungeon Keeper. When Lionhead Studios was formed by Peter Molyenux in 1997, Healey joined and worked as an artist and designer on Black & White. While working at the studio, he created a game in his spare time called Rag Doll Kung Fu, which would eventually go on to be the first non-Valve game sold on Steam in October of 2005. Shortly after, Healey became one of the founders of Media Molecule, serving as the creative director of LittleBigPlanet and Dreams.

KAREEM ETTOUNEY

After graduating from Cairo's Fine Art University, Ettouney applied for a gig at Lionhead Studios in 2002. He worked as a concept artist on games like Black & White and Fable before co-founding Media Molecule as the art director.

DAVID SMITH

A programmer on Fable and Ragdoll Kung Fu, Smith co-founded Media Molecule as one of the technical directors.

ALEX EVANS

Another of the Bullfrog and Lionhead Studios bunch, Evans served as programmer on the likes of Dungeon Keeper, Black & White, The Movies, and Ragdoll Kung Fu before co-founding Media Molecule as the studio's other technical director.

CARA ELLISON

Ellison worked at Rockstar North as a QA Tester for Grand Theft Auto IV and wrote games criticism for the likes of *Kotaku* and *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* before landing a role as a narrative consultant for Dishonored 2. Ellison joined Media Molecule in 2017 as a narrative designer.

JOHN BEECH

Beech made a name for himself as one of the star creators of LittleBigPlanet's thriving community of fan creators, designing memorable levels in his spare time when he wasn't on the clock as a construction worker. He hung up his helmet and came to work for the studio in 2009 as a level designer for future LittleBigPlanet titles as well as Dreams.

VICTOR AGREN

Healey says that out of the 15 beta testers he had for Ragdoll Kung Fu, Agren was the only one who remained a steadfast tester throughout the whole process. Agren later joined Media Molecule as a designer on LittleBigPlanet and LittleBigPlanet 2. Agren left Media Molecule in 2014 to grow his own company Dead Toast Entertainment. He's currently developing the indie action game My Friend Pedro.

LUCI BLACK

After helping produce Discworld: Noire, Black worked at Creative Assembly as a producer on the Total War franchise before joining up with Media Molecule to lend her project management talent to LittleBigPlanet, Tearaway, and Dreams.

REX CROWLE

Crowle worked at Lionhead as an animator and lead graphic designer on some of the studios' most famous games. He left Lionhead in 2006 to work on LittleBigPlanet and, eventually, became creator of Tearaway. Crowle's since left the studio and is currently working on the indie action-adventure Knights and Bikes.

RICHARD FRANKE

The creator of Kitty Powers' Matchmaker worked on Burnout: Paradise and at Media Molecule on LittleBigPlanet and Tearaway before finding independent success with the popular mobile game.

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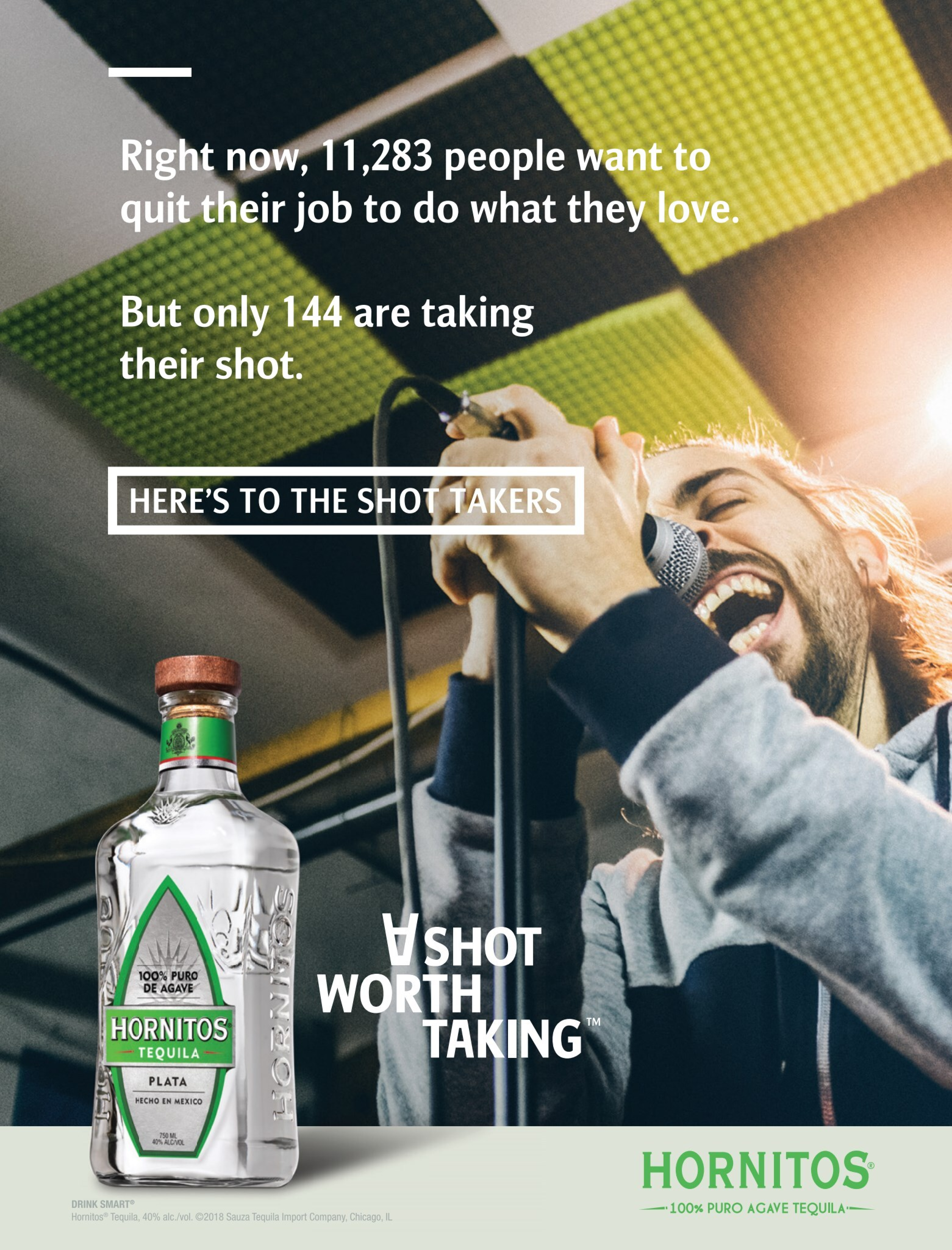
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